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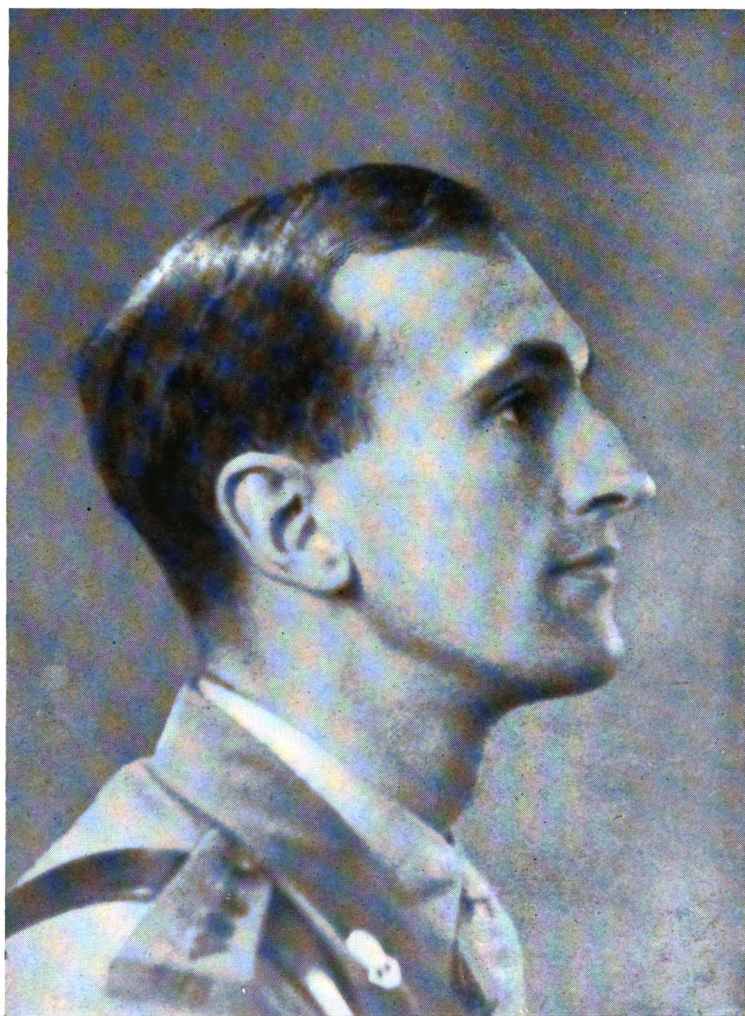


# GRANDFATHER LONGLEGS









Major H. P. Seagrim, G.C., D.S.O., M.B.E.

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# GRANDFATHER LONGLEGS

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*The Life and Gallant Death of*  
*Major H. P. Seagrim*  
*G.C., D.S.O., M.B.E.*

by

IAN MORRISON

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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So many people have helped to provide material for this book—literally they are to be numbered in hundreds—or have helped in other ways in its preparation, that it seems invidious to single out individuals for public acknowledgement. I should be glad, therefore, if all those who helped me in any way would accept this as an expression of my deep gratitude.

Perhaps I should make it clear that I never met Seagrim myself. My interest in the story began when 14th Army broke into the plains of Central Burma and reports first began to come in of a young Englishman who had become a great leader of the tribespeople living in the mountain ranges to the east and was indeed already a legendary figure amongst them. After we took Rangoon I went along to army headquarters one day and asked my friend Colonel Ronald Kaulback what were the true facts behind the story of this man Seagrim. He replied—"You had better talk to one of his Karen followers who has just come in." I talked to this Karen, for a week, and it was then that I resolved to try and collect all the available information and make the story more widely known.

The story is set against a background which is probably totally unfamiliar to the reader and I ask him to forgive the frequent digressions which the need to fill in this background has imposed on me. Certain material, which I consider significant but which could not be easily incorporated into the main narrative, I have relegated to appendices.

Nearly all the photographs were taken by Lieutenant Pablay Singh, who accepted with never-failing cheerfulness the discomforts of a long journey into the Karen country.

*Singapore, July 1946*

## NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

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The word *Karen* is pronounced with the accent on the second syllable.

In romanised Burmese *au* is pronounced *ow* (as in owl); *gyi* is pronounced *jee*, and *kyi* pronounced *chee*. The town of *Kyaukkyi*, for example, is pronounced *Cbowk-chee*. *Shwegyin*=Shway-jin; *Ba Gyaw*=Bah Jaw; *Tbra Kyaw Lay*=Thra Chaw Lay.

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## CHAPTER 1

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In every generation the British have produced men who possessed to a remarkable degree the capacity for inspiring the loyalty and devotion of native peoples. T. E. Lawrence, the most famous of them in recent history, was only one of many. They were born and brought up, as often as not, against the tranquil and unchanging background of the English countryside. They went abroad, as young men, impelled by the lure of adventure, by family convention, by conceptions of service, or by obscure urges which they themselves could not define. Some added tracts as big as their homeland to the empire. Some carved out principalities for themselves. Some gave their name and quality to famous regiments, like those cavalry regiments of the Indian Army whose very names still have the ring of romance. Yet others gained fame as leaders of oppressed peoples, as teachers, as priests. In this long tradition was a young British officer, Hugh Paul Seagrim of the Burma Rifles, whose name will always be linked with a hill people of south-east Asia called the Karens. What follows is as much the story of the Karens as it is the story of Seagrim. The destinies of the two have been so intertwined that it is impossible to write about one without writing about the other.

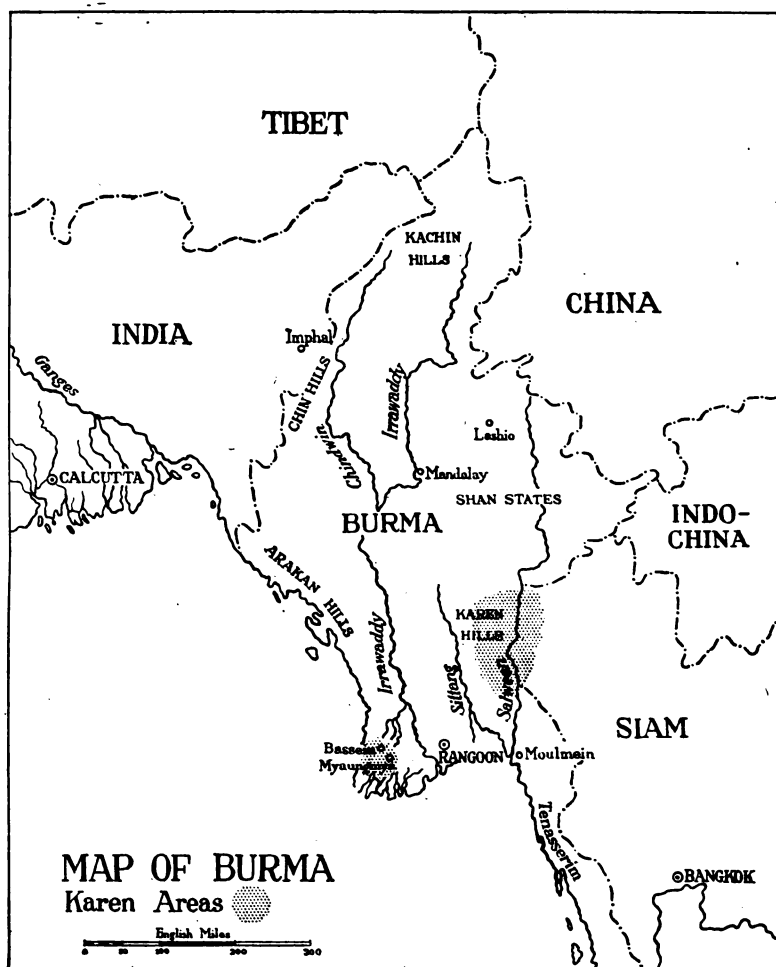
Who, then, are these Karens?

The Karens are one of the peoples, of whom the Burmese are another, who many centuries ago left their homes in eastern Tibet and south China and migrated south to the warmer climate and more fertile soil of south-east Asia. Wave after wave of migration came down from the north, Pyus, Talaings, Burmese, Karens, Chins, Kachins and many smaller

tribes. Some, like the Talaings, were absorbed by the Burmese. Others, like the Karens, took refuge in the mountain tracts that cup the rich plain of the Irrawaddy. Although ethnologists have advanced various theories, it is not known when the Karens first reached Burma, or where they came from, or why they came, or where they first settled. Their own traditions speak of a 'river of sand' which they had to cross in their travels. It may have been, as some have maintained, the Gobi Desert or the Yellow River. More probably it was the Salween or the Sittang. Certainly it seems that they are of predominantly Chinese origin, like the Thais, rather than of Tibetan origin, like the Burmese. (The Burmese, it is interesting to note, still have a perfectly good word for a yak, an animal they have not seen for at least a thousand years.) The Karens are more like the Chinese in appearance. Their language is tonal and is thought to be of Sinitic origin.

According to the 1931 census there were 1,400,000 of them, as against 9,267,000 Burmese. It is possible, however, that this figure of 1,400,000 is an under-estimate. When a Burmese peasant would be asked his race by a census enumerator, he often replied '*Buddha ba-tba*'—'I'm a Buddhist' and was thereupon classified as a Burman Buddhist. It is thought that many Buddhist Karens in the Delta made the same reply and were wrongly classified as Burmese instead of Karens. When the Japanese became worried about the Karen resistance movement in 1943, they carried out a census of their own and the Japanese estimate, according to the Karens, was nearly 4,000,000. The Karen associations are now carrying out yet another census and expect the total figure to reach 3,000,000. This figure, however, must be accepted with caution since the Karen leaders, for political reasons, are at present interested in making their community out to be as large as possible.

The Karen migration forked and one branch settled in the mountain ranges east of Burma between the Salween and Sittang rivers, the other branch in the Arakan ranges to the





west of Burma. In periods of peace and stability, especially during the last hundred years under British rule, many Karens came down and settled in the plains. One of the main concentrations of Karens today is in the low-lying country of the Irrawaddy delta and it is these delta Karens who are usually spokesmen for the Karen people as a whole. There are also Karen settlements in the Pegu Yomas, at Toungoo, Nyaunglebin and Pegu, at Moulmein and down the coast of Tenasserim. The Karens in these 'pockets' in the plains, even those of them who have become converted to Buddhism, still claim kinship and common interest with the Karens in the hills and resist any affiliation with the surrounding Burmese.

The Karens still retain certain tribal distinctions, the two biggest tribes being the Sgaws and the Pwos. Then there are the Bwes in Karenni (as the three small Karen states are called), the Red Karens (so-called from their red tunics), the Karenbyus or Striped Karens, and the Taungthus of the southern Shan States. The Padaungs, whose women elongate their necks with coils of wire and are popularly known as 'the giraffe-necked women of Burma', are a small Karen tribe. The so-called Black Karens, however, who live north of the Red Karens, are not Karens at all.

Ever since they first arrived in Burma, the Karens appear to have been a subject race, oppressed by their stronger neighbours and frequently used as slaves. A thirteenth-century Burmese inscription gives a list of thirty-one 'Cakraw' slaves, the word 'Cakraw' probably being the same as the word Sgaw. To avoid oppression the Karens lived in the hills and remoter parts. But even those who came down to live in the plains preserved their language, customs and traditions. It is a curious thing that whereas many other similar peoples (including their relatives the Talaings) were absorbed by the Burmese, the Karens succeeded in preserving their racial identity. They were scattered in widely-separated communities all over Burma. They were a subject and despised race. But they remained Karens.



1. A typical Karen levy



2. (a) Typical country in Salween District

(b) A typical *deb*, the sort of hut that Seagrim lived in throughout his time in the hills



They look not unlike the Burmese, and a western visitor to  
would at first have difficulty in distinguishing them.  
They are a smallish dark-haired people with a Mongoloid  
countenance. A common feature with the men is a  
very developed jaw. What perhaps distinguishes them  
from the Burmese is the expression of the face, open,  
lacking all guile. The hill Karens have a distinctive  
The men wear a simple tunic called a *bse*, the married  
a woven sarong and a short tunic, the girls and un-  
married women a long white garment like a nightdress.  
Originally they grew their own cotton, but of recent years  
they took cotton yarn up into the hills and the women  
and wove it on simple hand-loom. The plain Karens  
are much in contact with the Burmese usually wear  
Burmese dress.

Most of the Karens are simple cultivators. In the plains,  
in the hills too if there is some level land in the valleys,  
they practise the same type of cultivation as the Burmese.  
They divert water from rivers and streams, irrigate small  
paddy fields, and regulate the flow of water by closing or  
opening low earthen bunds. When the monsoon starts to-  
wards the end of May and turns the sun-baked earth into  
mud, the water-buffalo are brought up from the ponds where  
they have to wallow and are harnessed to the simple wooden  
ploughs. They drag the plough round and round the field  
turning up the mud. The seeds of rice are first planted in a  
seed-bed (the delicate green of the young seed-beds is one of  
the loveliest colours on earth) and the seedlings are trans-  
planted in July when they are about six inches high. The  
harvest is reaped in late November and December.

The hill Karens in the mountain villages of Salween Dis-  
trict where most of this story takes place, practise a different  
type of cultivation. Towards the end of the year they clear a  
patch on the hill-side, often felling very considerable  
timber to do so. The fallen timber and scrub is left to dry and  
burned off just before the rains begin. Sometimes they

leave the burning too late and get caught by the rains, but this happens rarely. A palisade of logs, with spikes facing outwards, is built round the patch (or *taungya* as it is called) to keep out wild animals, chiefly deer and wild pigs. The ground is hoed and the ashes mixed into the soil. When the soil is prepared holes are made with a sharpened stake and five or six grains dropped into each hole and covered with earth. The harvest is reaped earlier than in the plains, usually in October. There is no transplanting and no system of irrigation. Every year the cultivator moves on to another patch and only after a cycle of fifteen years does he return to the old one. This *taungya* system of cultivation is one of the most arduous and inefficient ever devised by man. It causes deforestation and ultimately soil erosion. It is responsible for the tragic bareness of much of southern and western Yunnan. Moreover it is totally unnecessary, for there are few tracts, even in the Salween country, where the terraced type of cultivation, more productive, less wasteful, less arduous, cannot be practised. The Karens, like all hill peoples, are conservative and tend to take the line that what was good enough for their fathers and grandfathers is good enough for them.

The hill Karens are first-rate elephant men, amongst the best in the world, for the elephant is the only beast of burden in the hills, and during the dry weather they often come down with their elephants to work for the foreign timber firms. In this way they earn the few rupees they need for their cash purchases—salt, knives and *dabs* (the Burmese machete), and cotton yarn. Otherwise the hill villages are economically self-sufficient.

As standards of education rose amongst them, many Karens of the more well-to-do families entered government service. Although lacking in initiative, they are industrious and more conscientious about routine work than the Burmese. Many have become teachers in government and mission schools. Because of their loyalty and willingness to submit to

discipline, many have been recruited into the Burma Rifles and the Burma Military Police. Karen girls are trained as baby *ayabs* and nurses, and in hospitals all over Burma a percentage of the nurses will be Karen girls.

There is little art amongst the Karens except for their weaving. Buddhist Karens are often heavily tattooed with charms and cabalistic signs, but the women do not adorn themselves, unless the coils of wire of the Padaung women be called adornment. (It is not clear whether this strange custom is merely a primitive banking system or whether it is a symbolic survival of an earlier era when the Padaungs, at a stage in their migrations from the wool country of the north to the cotton country of the south, had to clothe themselves by winding strips of bark round their bodies.) But although they have no art, the Karens are an extraordinarily musical people. They love music and sing naturally in harmony. In olden time they had their bards and traditional sagas. Feasts would always be accompanied by musical contests. The missionaries taught them hymns, which were translated into Karen, and many of the old Karen songs have been set to new musical forms. They have given up their traditional instruments, of which the six-stringed harp was the chief, and now play the piano, violin, guitar, and other instruments. It is astonishing how many of them can play musical instruments. The church choirs sing beautifully and the smallest Karen village, at a moment's notice, can put on a concert for the entertainment of a visitor. Their old songs were mournful and plaintive, the songs of an oppressed people. So long had they wept by the waters of the Irrawaddy. The songs they like to sing now are stirring hymns and ballads and the more vigorous products of the modern American muse.

The Karens are not an intelligent people. They are nothing like as quick-witted as the Burmese or the Chinese. They are often extremely stupid. Like most peoples who live in the hills or who have been long oppressed, they are reserved.

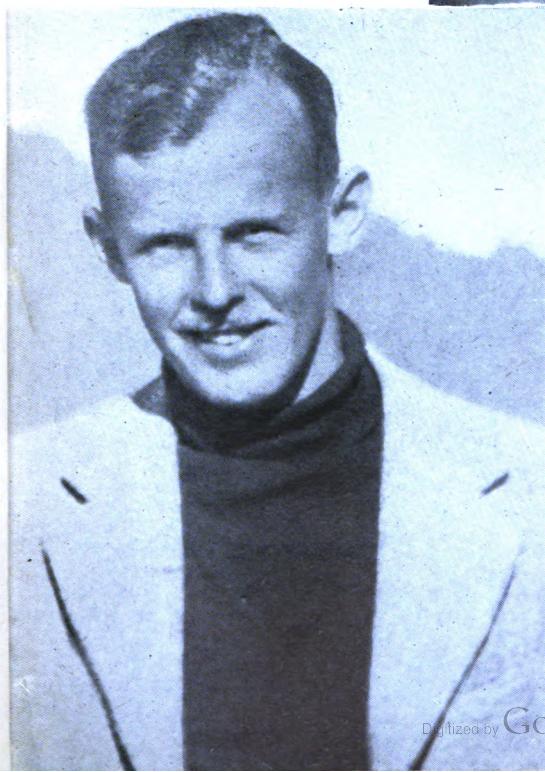


They like, to use their own expression, 'to put a thing in the heart'. Only when they know a man well will they open their hearts. To a man they know and trust and love they will remain faithful till they die. They are an extraordinarily *good* people. The word may be thought an odd and old-fashioned one to use, but it is the only one that describes the essential quality of the Karens, their honesty and truthfulness and, in its best sense, simplicity. The hill Karens, who have not been contaminated by contact with other races, are incapable of guile or deceit. They are peaceful and law-abiding folk, asking only to be treated fairly. Before the war there was practically no crime among them. After the harvest was gathered rice was stacked on the hill-sides with no guard over it. In the spring of 1946, when dacoity and lawlessness was rife all over Burmese Burma, the hills were absolutely quiet and safe. In the seven months he had been there since the Japanese surrender the Deputy Commissioner of Salween District had had only six cases to try in the court, three of them cases of petty pilfering. One of the reasons for the lack of crime amongst the Karens is that, unlike the Burmese, they have to work all the year round.

It was said by a leading authority on Burma, Sir J. G. Scott, that the Karens were devoid of a sense of humour. Humour is perhaps a cerebral affair or perhaps it is the habitual reserve of the Karens in the presence of strangers that has given rise to this oft-repeated generalisation. Certainly the Karens have a sense of *fun*, and in their own villages they laugh quite as much as other people.

The faults of the Karens are the inevitable concomitants of their good qualities. Their tenacity sometimes takes the form of an unintelligent obstinacy. The clannishness which enabled them to survive as a people has engendered an exclusiveness, which the Burmese especially often resent. Christian Karens are not always free from intolerance and priggishness. The latter will adopt an air of superiority not only to Burmese Buddhists but to Karen Buddhists as well. Peoples in the

3. (a) Captain McCrindle



(b) Major Nimmo



4. (a) Saw Rupert



(b) Thra Shwe Laye

process of shaking off an age-old inferiority complex often go to the other extreme and for a time appear to be suffering from a superiority complex. Perhaps their worst fault is their susceptibility to child-like petty jealousies.

Family ties are strong. The young people are gay enough and on summer nights the young men make love to their sweethearts in the shadows of the little huts, whispering and laughing softly beneath the full moon. They do not write the long love-letters which the young Burmese address to the objects of their passion, full of extravagant and flowery epithets. But their love is deep and enduring. After they marry, the young men settle down and live quietly and faithfully with their families. It was the custom in the old days for the young Karen to serenade his sweetheart on the harp. The custom still persists although the instrument now is more likely to be the guitar or banjo. Unfaithfulness and promiscuity have always been forbidden and formerly would be punished with expulsion from the village as being sins against the fruitfulness of the earth. In the hills, although some initiative is allowed to the young people, most marriages are arranged by the parents and elders. The young man nearly always goes to live in his wife's home.

The social unit is the village, nearly self-sufficient economically, presided over by the village elders. Many of the activities of the village are communal and the elders take the decisions for the community. It may be the choice of a new site for the village, the allocation of land, co-operation in clearing the hill-sides or bringing in the harvest, or a village drive for game or fish. Headmen are appointed, but tend in practice to be chairmen of committees, all important decisions resting with the elders in council.

No love is lost between the Karens, especially the hill Karens, and the Burmese. At bottom it is the old hostility between the tribesman of the hills and the dweller in the plains. Behind them lie centuries of strife and a deep distrust. For centuries the Burman bullied the Karen and regarded

him as a slave. This attitude still continues, perhaps unconsciously, in the mind of the Burman. There are differences of character. Whereas the Karen is naturally moral, almost austere, the Burman is often light in his loves, both before and after marriage. Whereas the Karen is naturally truthful (perhaps because he is slow-witted), the Burman is a confirmed boaster. The Burman is a delightful and amusing companion, but he is volatile, unstable, inconstant, with sudden enthusiasms and passions, never long sustained. The Karen is slow to love, slow to anger, but his loves and hatreds last much longer. The Burmese quickly forgot the communal trouble of 1942. But it seared the consciousness of the Karens and it will be many years before they forget what happened at Myaungmya and Papun. The Karens suffer from a dearth, the Burmese from an excess, of leadership. Every young Burman wants to be a *Bob*, a leader, and have his own following. The young Karen, on the other hand, submits naturally to discipline.

On top of these differences of temperament are overlaid more recent differences arising out of contact with the west. Although Christianity has done so much for the Karens, it has nevertheless interposed another barrier between them and the Buddhist Burmese. Because of the Burman's dislike of discipline, the pre-war Burma Army was composed almost entirely of hill peoples, Karens, Chins and Kachins, and this was resented by the Burmese. Lastly, whereas the politically-minded Burmese want independence, the Karens dread the day when the British leave Burma. They fear that they will once again find themselves as defenceless as in the black days of 1942.



## CHAPTER 2

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The Karens have always believed that one day their bondage would end. Their most popular legend, that of Taw-mei-pa, tells of a hero of olden time who is still alive somewhere and will reappear as their deliverer in the hour of his people's need. Taw-mei-pa was an old man living at the foot of a mountain whose fields were continually ravaged by a wild boar. He killed the boar (or rather overcame it, for it was a magic boar which could not be killed) and from one of its tusks he made a comb. Whoever combed his hair with this comb grew young again and was never sick and never grew old. As a result the Karens multiplied and had to find more living-space. Taw-mei-pa set out to find a land where 'the earth dug out of one pit would be sufficient to fill up seven pits of similar size'. After long wanderings he crossed a river of sand and found such a land. He returned to his home and then set off to lead the Karens to this land. They reached the river, the Karens faint with hunger. Taw-mei-pa urged them on saying that there was plenty of food across the river. But the Karens were so tired that they stopped by the river, and Taw-mei-pa went on ahead. Then the Karens found some screw-shells and the red-stalked plant called Roselle (known in Burma as 'poor man's rice'). They boiled the shells and the stalks of roselle for days, but the shells remained hard, and the stalks, as they imagined, 'still full of blood'. Then some Chinese appeared and showed them how to crack the shells open and explained that what they thought was blood in the roselle was only its juice and natural colour. Then, after they had fed, the Karens crossed the river and went on. Soon they found their way obstructed by tall banana palms.

Not knowing that these palms sprout up almost overnight, they thought that Taw-mei-pa must be a long way ahead and that now they would never be able to catch him up. So they turned back. As for Taw-mei-pa, he has gone on with his magic comb, but he still keeps a watch on his unruly children. One day, believe the Karens, he will take them to the pleasant land beyond the river.

Some of the religious traditions of the Karens, when missionaries first came across them in the first half of the last century, were so like those in the Book of Genesis that certain missionaries thought the Karens must be one of the lost tribes of Israel. They had always been monotheistic and they had inherited from their ancestors a body of moral precepts beginning 'Children and grandchildren', which inculcated truthfulness, chastity, sobriety, honesty, hospitality, industry and other virtues. They believed in an all-powerful God called *T'wa*. One of the old Karen poems has been translated as follows:<sup>1</sup>

*T'wa is unchangeable, eternal;  
He was in the beginning of the world;  
T'wa is endless and eternal;  
He existed in the beginning of the world;  
T'wa is truly unchangeable and eternal.  
The life of T'wa is endless.  
A succession of worlds does not measure his existence.  
T'wa is perfect in every meritorious attribute.  
And dies not in succession on succession of worlds.*

The missionaries found that the Karens already had versions of the Biblical legends of the creation. *T'wa*, according to the Karen story, made the world in seven days. He made man and then woman. A servant whom he had cast out of his presence for a gross insult became *Naw k'plaw*, the power of evil. He tempted the man and the woman in the guise of a snake. The rest of the story closely follows the Hebrew story.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Smeaton's *The Loyal Karens of Burma*.

The combination of the monotheism of the Karens, the resemblance of the word *T'wa* to Jahveh or Jehovah, the closeness of their traditions and precepts to those in the Old Testament, and the repetitive form of their religious poems, suggests a Hebraic origin. How such Hebraic traditions could have reached the Karens is a mystery. It has been suggested that the Karens in their southward migration crossed the route of the Nestorian missionaries to China. Marco Polo records that there were Nestorian churches all along the old silk route across central Asia. If that be the explanation, why then did they not acquire the story of Christ as well? It has been further suggested that they acquired these traditions from wandering colonies of Jews who reached China. But the best-known Jewish colony in China, that at Kaifeng on the Yellow river, never exercised any influence on the Chinese and became almost completely sinicised.

It is tempting to imagine that at some stage in their southward wanderings the Karens came into contact with some wandering Jew or Jews, some great story-teller perhaps, who told these stories to a simple and unlettered people, stories which captured their imagination and became their own. It is possible, however, that these traditions came into being in the early days of missionary contact with the Karens, that the Karens, on hearing the Biblical stories, sometimes said: 'Oh yes, we've got a story like that.' The truth is that very little serious scientific work has been done on the Karens. Their origins and many of their beliefs remain the subject of conjecture only.

Certain it is that the traditional belief of the Karens in an all-powerful, all-pervading God was combined with the practice of an elaborate system of spirit-worship, such as one would expect to find amongst a primitive people living close to nature. Most of the hill Karens are still animists. They believe that there is a *k'la* or spirit that resides in every man, his life-force, which is continually being solicited by other spirits to leave his body. The *k'la* comes from another existence



into a man at the time of his birth, and at death it leaves him to enter another existence. It leaves the body during sleep and many Karens believe that it is not wise to wake a sleeper too suddenly in case his *k'la* has not yet returned. If the *k'la* remains away too long, then the man falls sick, and if it does not return, he dies. Thus offerings must be made continually to ensure that the *k'la* stays in the body, and if it leaves the body and the man is sick, then offerings must be made and rites performed to persuade it to return. Rivers, trees, stones, all have their resident spirits. There are the spirits of men who died violent deaths, or who for some crime have been condemned to a wandering existence, malevolent spirits who seek to do evil to men. They must be propitiated. There is the guardian spirit of the house, before whom gifts of food must be laid, so that he will not become hungry and leave the house. The hill Karens spend much time in rites designed to retain the favour of good spirits and avert the malevolence of bad ones. For the Buddhist Karens and even for the Christian Karens the unseen spirit world is still near.

After the story of Taw-mei-pa, the next most famous Karen legend is that of the Golden Book. It has had a most powerful influence on their recent religious development. According to this legend, the original father of the peoples of Burma had three sons. To his eldest son, the Karen, he gave a golden book; to his second son, the Burman, a palm-leaf book; to his youngest son, who was white, a book of leather. The father of the peoples, from his home in the far north, sent his sons down into Burma. The Burman's palm-leaf book was eaten by white ants, the white brother's leather book by pigs. Then the Burman began to quarrel with the Karen for possession of the golden book. To preserve it the Karen entrusted it to his young white brother. The latter was skilled in sailing boats and he sailed away with it across the seas.

The Karens believed that one day the young brother would return bringing with him the golden book. Then the

sufferings of the Karens would cease and they would find peace and contentment again. The legend of the golden book, as well as the story of Taw-mei-pa, contained the idea of a messianic hope.

In 1813 the great American Baptist missionary, Dr. Adoniram Judson, reached Burma and started to labour amongst the Burmese. He endured great hardships and on several occasions was thrown into prison. His ardour never flagged, and in addition to his other activities he compiled a grammar of the Burmese language and translated the whole of the Bible into Burmese. Dr. Judson had a Karen water-carrier called Ko Tha Byu. He was an ex-bandit who had taken part in the killing of thirty men. He had been about to be sold into slavery in payment of a debt when Dr. Judson had stepped in and purchased him. Ko Tha Byu was middle-aged, of an uncontrollable temper, and seemed to be hopelessly stupid. One day he came across a tract in Burmese written by Dr. Judson. With great difficulty he spelt out the Burmese letters. It was a revelation to him. Here was the fulfilment of the tradition about the white brother and the golden book. Ko Tha Byu was baptised in 1828 and at once he started to preach the glad tidings amongst his people. The response was immediate, and in this manner began one of the most remarkable Christian movements of modern times. In the early years the Burmese authorities severely persecuted the Karen Christians. Several suffered for their faith, some by crucifixion. But more and more Karens were baptised and the movement went steadily ahead under the guidance of a succession of able and wise American missionaries. The Burmese alphabet was adapted to the Karen language, some new letters being added, and the Bible was translated into both Sgaw and Pwo Karen. A Karen theological seminary was started at Moulmein in 1885, and the Baptist College at Rangoon, now called Judson College and forming part of Rangoon University, was founded in 1875. Several good schools were established. Rarely has the seed of Christianity

been planted in such a fruitful soil. Within a generation it had become a healthy, vigorous plant, with its roots deep in the ancient traditions and beliefs of the people. At an early stage the Karen Christian communities accepted responsibility for building and maintaining their own religious institutions. Karen pastors carried on the work begun by the American missionaries. Some years before the war several centres like Bassein were adjudged capable by the American mission headquarters of carrying on without any American assistance, except for a few teachers in the schools.

It is estimated that there are now about 200,000 Baptist Karens, 40,000 Catholic Karens and 8,000 Anglican Karens. The figures, however, are slightly misleading, for, although only one-sixth of the Karen population of Burma is Christian, this one-sixth has much more influence than the remaining five-sixths. It is probable, too, that in proportion to total numbers there is a higher standard of education, and certainly a greater percentage of English speakers, amongst the Karens than amongst the Burmese. Christianity made such rapid strides because it was accompanied by, was indeed mainly responsible for, two other processes—the gradual civilising of a hitherto rude and unlettered people, and the growth of Karen unity and prestige. Christianity was identified in the mind of the people with education. Education raised their standard of living, gave them confidence and pride, and aroused what has been called their ‘federative capacity’.

Although it was by chance that it was the American Baptists who first came into contact with the Karens instead of missionaries of other denominations, the simplicity and directness of the Baptist faith seem to have struck a chord in the national character of the Karens. A democratic and decentralised system of Church government was well adapted to a people living in small village communities. There is, moreover, a Calvinistic strain in the Karen character and many of them become as rigid sabbatarians as were ever Presbyterian



5. (a) Agriculture in the Karen hills. A *taungya* near Pyagawpu, with the rice just beginning to sprout

(b) Dyeing







6. (a) Lieutenant Po Hla

(b) Lieutenant Ba Gyaw



Scots in the Highlands. The part played by music, by sermons and readings from the Golden Book, total immersion (which to a simple people is more efficacious than partial immersion), the austerity of the service and the simplicity of the church itself—all these were characteristics of Baptist Christianity that appealed strongly to the Karens. One of the strengths of Christianity among them has been its place in the day-to-day life of the people. The church serves as school, concert-hall, meeting-place. Like the English church in the Middle Ages, it is the centre of the life of the community, lay as well as religious.

There are other eastern peoples who, in greater or lesser numbers, have adopted Christianity. But their Christianity has sometimes had an element of incongruity, like a plant which has been transplanted to an unsuitable soil. In the Pacific especially, by detribalising the natives, missionaries have destroyed many old sound customs and proud cultures without giving much in exchange. With the Karens it is different. As one looks round at the flat, serious, contented faces at a Karen service, and listens to their full-blooded singing and the pastor earnestly expounding the words of the Golden Book, or at evening in a hill village, when the family gathers round the hearth for prayers and a hymn and a passage from the New Testament, read by the light of the fire, one feels that it is all completely right and natural. Christianity has fitted in with their religious traditions, their ethical code, and a national character preoccupied with morality. More than anything else it has regenerated them as a people.

## CHAPTER 3

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**T**he Karens call the American missionaries their 'mother'. The British Government they call their 'father'.

They have a long tradition of service under the British, going back to the early days of British contact with Burma. When the East India Company acquired the provinces of Arakan and Tenasserim in 1827 a new era dawned for the Karens, one in which their dreams of justice and peace were at last to find fulfilment. That they seem to have realised this is suggested by the help which they gave to the British in the campaigns against the kingdom of Ava in 1826. They served as guides, and a certain Major Snodgrass, who wrote an account of the first Burmese war, commended their services. In the provinces taken over by the British they were well and fairly treated, but in Pegu and other provinces still administered by Ava they continued to be oppressed. They were not allowed to visit their teachers, and as late as 1851 the Burmese viceroy threatened to shoot any Karen who was able to read. In the second Burmese war of 1852 the Karens again helped the British and are reported to have acted as guides to the force which took the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Again the Burmese took reprisals and burned all Karen villages within fifty miles of Rangoon, seizing or destroying the stocks of rice and killing men, women and children in barbarous ways. In the third Burmese war of 1885 which led to the annexation of Upper Burma, and in the period of lawlessness which followed it, there was widespread fighting between the Burmese and the Karens. Then, as in 1942, Karen levies were raised to protect their homes and villages from marauding bands of Burmese. The American missionaries played a brave part in arming and organising these levies and on more than one

occasion led the levies into action. The history of those days, as told in the letters of Dr. Vinton, one of the able successors to Dr. Judson, makes strange reading, for passage after passage could be duplicated from the history of the past few years. Dr. Vinton was one of the first to perceive the potential military qualities of the Karens. 'Under their own officers,' he wrote, 'and commanded by men they trust, the Karens will go anywhere, and do what no other troops can do. You could put ten thousand such men in the field for little more than the cost of one sepoy regiment; but they must be led by *men*.'

Like all hill peoples, like the Gurkhas of Nepal, like the Garhwalis and Kumaonis and Dogras of the southern Himalayan slopes, like the Kachins of north Burma and the Chins of west Burma, the Karens make good soldiers. In the Burma Rifles it was the usual practice in the battalions to have one company of Chins, one of Kachins, and two companies of Karens. The officers were either British officers who came out to Burma after Sandhurst and a short attachment in England, or British officers seconded from the Indian Army for service in Burma, or else educated young Burmans, Karens, Chins and Kachins who had been awarded King's Commissions.

The British officers would warmly debate the rival merits of the various classes, usually espousing the cause of the class they commanded. The general feeling before the war was that the Karen, although reliable and steady, was lacking in initiative, and that the Chin and Kachin made better fighting soldiers. It must be remembered that the Karens are one of the most pacific peoples in the world, whereas the Chins and Kachins have only recently, under British administration, emerged from a condition of chronic tribal warfare and family vendetta. This verdict, however, may have to be revised in view of the record of the Karens during this war.

Towards the end of 1931 there came out to Taiping in Malaya, to join the 1st/20th Burma Rifles, who were



temporarily stationed there, a young British officer, Hugh Paul Seagrim, then twenty-two years old, a tall, dark, rather cadaverous young man, who soon became very brown under the Malayan sun. He was posted to a Karen company and at an early date seems to have formed a strong attachment to the Karens. Throughout his service in the Burma Rifles he was with Karen companies.

It is difficult for anyone who has not known that marvellous creation of the British genius called the Indian Army to understand to the full the deep attachments, based on mutual respect and mutual affection, which develop between the young British officers and the men they command. It often happens that this attachment is to the class with which the young subaltern is first associated. If he starts with a company of Punjabi Mussulmans, he will always maintain that Punjabi Mussulmans make the finest soldiers in the Indian Army. If he starts with Sikhs, he will maintain that they are the best. And if he is posted to one of the Gurkha regiments, even when he becomes a general and commands men of every fighting race in three continents, he will still feel in his heart of hearts (though now perhaps he cannot say so in public) that there is no one quite to touch the Gurkha. So it seems to have been with Seagrim and the Karens.

One of the first things the other officers in the 1st/20th learned about Seagrim was that he was a staunch Norfolk man. It was about the time that the rector of the Norfolk village of Stiffkey was receiving much attention in the popular press in England. In the inconsequential way that these things happen, Seagrim acquired the nickname of Stooky. Thereafter he was always known as Stooky Seagrim.

He was born not in Norfolk but at Ashmansworth in Hampshire, in 1909. His father, the Reverend Charles Paulet Conyngham Seagrim, was the son of a Crimean veteran who had spent many years in India. Three of the Reverend C. Seagrim's brothers went into the army and one into the Indian Police. He himself, after obtaining a first class in mathematics

at Cambridge, took up the study of law, but he felt the call of the Church, and after being ordained went out to Basutoland as a missionary. He spent several years in Basutoland and the Cape Colony and returned to England in 1895. For a time he was curate at Hamble, that delightful little village on the Hamble river near Southampton. Evidently he had that wandering spirit which was to manifest itself so strongly in his sons, for in 1898 he went over to Dinant in Brittany as the Church of England chaplain. It was there that he met his future wife, daughter of a Norwich lawyer who had retired and was living in France. They married, and on returning to England lived for several years in Hampshire. In 1909 a Norfolk living in the gift of Mrs. Seagrim's brother-in-law fell vacant and the Reverend Charles Seagrim became rector of Whissonsett-with-Horningtoft, two small adjoining Norfolk villages, about twenty miles north-west of Norwich. He never sought preferment, although an able and clever man. He was quite happy and he realised that his five young sons could have no happier background to their youth than Whissonsett rectory and the Norfolk countryside. He remained there till his death in 1927.

The rectory was a large rambling building, neither old nor beautiful, but commodious and comfortable and possessing a large garden. On the glebe the rector kept two ponies which the boys used to ride, some cows and pigs and fowls. The village cricket field was just opposite the rectory, and here on Saturday afternoons in summer the Whissonsett XI, sometimes fielding all five Seagrim brothers, who were all reasonably proficient at games, would struggle with other village teams, Helhoughton, Tittleshall, Great Ryburgh, Guist, Toftrees, Tatterford, Sculthorpe, East Rudham, Weasenham St. Peter. In summer there was sailing on the Broads or fishing or tennis parties or long expeditions on foot or bicycle through the pleasant rolling landscape of East Anglia. In winter there was rough shooting (but they had to work hard, for this part of Norfolk is renowned for its poachers) or long

rides on the ponies or village football. The 'boys from the rectory', as they were known, were on Christian name terms with all the people in the village, and took part in all the communal activities of the village.

The father insisted on his sons going to church once on Sundays. Mrs. Seagrim played the wheezy old organ, one of her sons pumping hard at the bellows. There are many dissenters round Whissonsett, and there was not usually a big attendance in church. But whenever there was a flower-show or a village 'do', it was always held at the rectory. At Christmas the whole family worked hard putting on a play or some show for the village children.

The two elder boys won scholarships to Gresham's School, Holt, on the Norfolk coast only sixteen miles from Whissonsett. The three others went to King Edward VI School, Norwich. Here there were about 200 pupils, including fifty boarders, many of the latter being sons of the local clergy. (Nelson, who came from a similar Norfolk rectory, went to school here, as also did the first Rajah of Sarawak.)

There was of course never enough money. It did not worry the boys, but it was sometimes a worry to their father. Somehow they got through. All five sons had a good sound education and all grew up able to do all the things which gentlemen are supposed to be able to do. One result of having no money was that they had to make their own amusements. To the outsider's eye they lived 'buried in the country'. But the outsider rarely knows how intensely full and varied and satisfying is the life that goes on in small communities like Whissonsett-with-Horningtoft. And the Seagrim family must have been an extraordinarily happy one, to judge by the affection which all five sons have had not only for their parents but for their home and Norfolk.

On both sides of the family there were so many relatives in the army that it must have seemed quite natural for the eldest son Charles to go on to Woolwich from Gresham's. He was commissioned into the Royal Artillery and served in

India and Burma, being invalided out of the army after falling seriously ill in Burma.

He was followed to Woolwich by the second son Cyril who went into the Royal Engineers. A great yachtsman and falconer, he served in India, the Red Sea, Aden, Somaliland, the North West Frontier, China, Africa. He was with the Sapper Beach Assault Experimental Group and was awarded the O.B.E. for his work in Normandy. He has now left the army and is reading botany at Cambridge.

The third son Derek failed in his entrance examination to Sandhurst and would not have got in had there not been two unexpected last-minute vacancies. He joined the Green Howards and served his country first in Jamaica. The battalion returned to England, but only for a day, and was immediately whipped off to Palestine to cope with some crisis there. Thence the battalion went to China to help amongst other things in the suppression of piracy round Hong Kong. On its way back to England from China the battalion was again diverted to Palestine and Derek Seagrim served under the famous Sir Charles Tegart crushing terrorism. Then he did a tour with the King's African Rifles. The battalion came home, but after eighteen months was sent back to the old trouble spot, Palestine, where for a time Derek was an intelligence officer in Jerusalem. After the war started, he served as an air liaison officer in Africa, went through the Greek campaign (meeting one of his cousins, later killed, commanding a destroyer), and eventually was given command of the 7th battalion Green Howards. He died of wounds received while leading his battalion in the assault on the Mareth Line and was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for outstanding gallantry. It was said of Derek Seagrim that he had a marvellous capacity for mixing with the men in his battalion on the easiest terms and yet at the same time retaining their respect. (Who can tell to what extent a Norfolk village upbringing gave him this touch? Certainly it must have helped.)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For the citation, see Appendix 6.

The fourth son Jack went to Sandhurst and then into the Indian Army where he already had two cousins in the Gurkha Rifles and one in the Rajputana Rifles. He joined the 2nd Punjab Regiment and saw much service in Waziristan on the North West Frontier, that strange part of the world where fighting never ceases, where war is still, as it was in the Middle Ages, a dangerous game played according to elaborate rules by both sides. He married the daughter of an East Anglian parson, thus further consolidating this ancient and honourable English connection between Church and Army. During the war he was a staff-officer at general headquarters, Persia-Iraq Force, then second-in-command of a battalion of his regiment at Kohima, and later obtained command of a new battalion.

The youngest son, who was always known in the family as 'Bumps' (no one knew why), originally wanted to become a doctor. But the father died during his last year at school at Norwich and there was not enough money to send him to the university. He had to start earning his living soon, so there was little choice but for him to go into the Services too. However, it was felt that four sons in the army was quite enough for any one family, and it was decided that this youngest one should try to enter the Royal Navy through the special public school entry. At the preliminary medical examination the doctors found that he was partially colour-blind. This debarred him from a naval career and so he too went to Sandhurst.

Seagrim did not distinguish himself particularly at Sandhurst. He kept goal for the R.M.C. XI, as he had also done for his school XI. He was very tall, about 6 feet 4 inches, and had a long reach. He joined the Indian Army, went out to India, and was first attached to a battalion of the Highland Light Infantry at Cawnpore. In India his love of mountains first had an opportunity to express itself and he was able, on short leaves, to make two expeditions into the Himalayas, one into Sikkim, the other into the mountains round Everest.

On this latter trip, which he made alone with a few native porters, he met one of the returning Everest expeditions. They loaned him some of their guides and porters and gave him some useful advice, but the closing weather which had forced them back soon forced Seagrim back too. It is evident from some of the photographs he took that he must have attained to a considerable height. After a year in India he was posted to the 1st/20th battalion Burma Rifles at Taiping.

The 1st/20th battalion was soon to be renumbered as the 1st battalion Burma Rifles. Seagrim served first with them, then with the 3rd battalion, and later, when the regiment was greatly expanded shortly before the war, with the 12th battalion. It should be explained here why, in the citation to the George Cross which he was eventually awarded, his regiment was given as the 19th Hyderabad Regiment. In 1937 there was a reorganisation of the Burma Army. Those officers serving with the Burma Rifles were given the option of returning to their Indian Army units or of re-enlisting in the Burma Rifles for a four-year term. Young officers like Seagrim who did not possess a parent unit in the Indian Army had to go through a *pro forma* enlistment in one of the Indian Army regiments. Seagrim chose the 19th Hyderabad Regiment (now the Kumaon Regiment) because, he said, they were composed largely of hill peoples like the Karens. So, although in the Army List he is down as Captain H. P. Seagrim, 19th Hyderabad Regiment, he never served with that regiment and from first to last he belonged to the Burma Rifles.

Before his battalion left Malaya to return to Burma, he made a trip to Japan on three months' leave. He travelled through the Japanese countryside and liked and admired the Japanese.

On arrival in Burma Seagrim immediately became interested in the country and its people. He passed his examination in spoken Burmese in five weeks, which was considered remarkable. On his short leaves (and officers in the Indian

and Burma armies used to have plenty of leave), instead of going to the usual places and doing the accepted things, he took to disappearing into the country. Sometimes he would take another officer with him. More often he would go alone. And always he would take six to twelve Karens from his company with him. In this way he got to know the men under him extraordinarily well and he used to say that one of the most important things for an officer was 'knowing the men he commanded'. Once he went on an expedition across lower Salween District and reached Kawkareik on the Siamese frontier. Once he went up into the Chin Hills. Once he stayed for two months in a Burmese Buddhist monastery on the Tenasserim coast. Several times he went to the Delta. On these trips he lived with the Karens and stayed with them in their little mountain villages. Although he learned to understand Karen, he never spoke it well, probably because nearly all Karens speak either Burmese or English.

In Rangoon Seagrim was chiefly known to the local inhabitants, European and Asiatic, for his prowess as a goal-keeper. He kept goal for his battalion, for the regiment and even for the All-Burma team which met and defeated a touring Islington Corinthian side in 1937 on the Burma Athletic Association's field. There are many Burmese who remember him, for they bet heavily on football matches in Burma and naturally take a more than normal interest in goal-keepers. Seagrim, as the only European in the team, was appointed captain of the Burma side for this match, but he said it was unfair that he, a comparative newcomer, should be captain and he insisted that the Karen centre-half be appointed.

He was not a particularly sociable person. He drank little beyond the odd social drink in the mess, and he smoked little. And yet, according to an officer who knew him well in the 12th battalion, he was easily the best-liked officer in the mess. 'He was one of the most amusing talkers I have ever known. To listen to him for five minutes was a tonic. He could be very

very funny. The thing that always used to strike me about him was his unfailing good humour and his ability to make anything amusing.' It was not that he was unsociable so much as that he did not like *formal* social occasions, dances, mess-nights and the like. When he did attend a dance, which was rarely, he enjoyed it and was good company, and at one New Year's Eve fancy-dress ball just before the war he made a great hit, dressed as an old woman with a red wig. Although an excellent horseman, he refused to play polo because he said he disliked the 'horsy atmosphere' of Rangoon. He was critical of the mem-sahibs and their way of life, critical, too, of the average padres, who, he maintained, 'didn't get to the root of things'. He was often an intolerant and destructive critic.

Although a highly unconventional person, he did not set out deliberately to be unconventional. It was rather that he took nothing for granted and he cared little what other people thought. At one time he had a great craving for speed and bought a three-litre Bentley. Later he went in for motor-bicycles, first Nortons and then Ariel Square-Fours, which are powerful machines fitted with Austin Seven engines. For a time he was keenly interested in wireless. Not very robust and suffering frequently from dysentery, he loved to experiment with novel diets. On leave in England he once went to a doctor and lived, so it was reported, for twenty-five days on water, fruit juices and milk. Appointed messing officer on his return to Burma, some of the vegetarian dishes which he tried to introduce into the mess nearly caused a riot. Music was a constant love. He had a large collection of classical records and an elaborate gramophone in his room with an enormous horn and a baffle-board on the ceiling. He used to attend regularly the meetings of the Rangoon Gramophone Society. But except for music his enthusiasms came and went, and when he was not in the throes of an enthusiasm he led a somewhat idle life.

He was an omnivorous and indiscriminate reader. He was interested especially in religion, philosophy and politics. But



with reading, too, his enthusiasms came and went. He would plunge with a sort of frenzy into one subject, and then, after a time, plunge into another. At one time he had a craze for Nietzsche. 'Nietzsche is the only man. He's got the right ideas.' For a time Nietzsche would be 'the only man', and then it would be Havelock Ellis, or Bertrand Russell, or Bergson, or Santayana. An officer who shared the same bungalow for a time arrived when the current enthusiasm was Schopenhauer. Seagrim was always talking about 'the real essence of truth' or 'the real essence of beauty'. He even made the officer read Schopenhauer. To a congenial companion he loved to expound his theories and talk and argue into the late hours.

Although he had this deep interest in religion, Seagrim was not a 'religious man' in the popular sense of the term and he seems to have despised the forms and formalities of religion. He never went to church unless it was a compulsory church parade. Although critical of most padres, he was a great friend of the Roman Catholic padre, Father Whitaker, and loved arguing with him about Catholicism. He was a friend, too, of the Archdeacon of Rangoon, the Venerable W. H. Higginbotham, who died of pneumonia during the retreat of 1942, after exhausting his strength looking after evacuees.

The Bible was another enthusiasm. He would declare in the mess that it was 'the finest literature in the world'. It is significant perhaps, in view of what was to happen later, that it was the Bible as literature which first impressed him.

Seagrim, according to another officer who knew him, gave the impression of 'a man who was groping for the answers to things'.

It was partly the deep religious capacity of the Karens, their trusting belief in God, that drew him so powerfully towards them. He used to say that they were God's chosen people. Perhaps he felt that they had found some of the answers to things.

I once asked one of his old Karen riflemen why Seagrim had been so popular with the Karens. He laughed and replied:

'He was a very good footballer. He used to keep goal for the Karens.' And then his face became thoughtful, and there was a long pause, and he said: 'He loved the Karens.'

As a soldier, Seagrim was a regimental rather than a staff officer. He was happiest when handling men. But his approach to soldiering was as individual and unconventional as it was to everything else. There is a story told that during some exercises before the war Seagrim and his company were sent up to Pegu, fifty miles north-east of Rangoon, and told that they were to come south and try to capture Mingaladon, the cantonment area on the outskirts of Rangoon. In Pegu Seagrim procured some Burmese buses. He made his men lie down on the floor and got some Burmese women to sit on the seats. The buses drove straight down to Mingaladon, passed unchallenged through the defenders' positions, and fetched up bang in the middle of the objective. He was very annoyed when he was told that this was not playing the game and that he was to go back to Pegu and try to take Mingaladon by some other and more conventional method. 'But,' he remonstrated, with the staff officers in charge of the exercise, 'it's exactly what the Japanese would do.' Which of course it was.

He felt that there were many things wrong with the pre-war Burma Army. He thought that the natural gifts of the hillmen who formed the rank-and-file in the Burma Rifles were ignored and that they were trained too much along Indian Army lines, with too much parade-ground drilling, too much holding of bunkers and prepared positions in their training, too many formal manoeuvres. These hillmen should be trained as guerrilla troops to work in their own hills. Why make them wear boots when they were more comfortable bare-foot?

He disagreed with the method of recruitment. Recruiting, before the war, was done from fixed bases to which it was hoped volunteers would report for service. The recruiting-officer, maintained Seagrim, should go out into the hills and

## CHAPTER 4

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Shortly after Japan declared war in December, 1941, some British officers were sent up from Singapore to Rangoon to organise special operations in Burma. Oriental Mission, as it was known, had the task of imposing the maximum delay on the enemy 'by the use of any forces other than regular forces'. These officers started to organise 'left-behind parties' in case the Japanese should overrun Burma. They made plans for industrial denial, such as the destruction of plant at the Tavoy, Mawchi and Namtu mines. They also surveyed the possibilities of raising guerrilla forces from the tribes-people on Burma's frontiers. The difficulties which they had to contend with were enormous. The possibilities of special operations, especially in Asiatic countries, were still unknown and unappreciated at that time. The military situation was deteriorating from day to day. All forms of military equipment were woefully short.

The idea of raising guerrilla forces from the hill peoples had long been in the minds of men who knew the value of the hillmen as fighters. One of these men was Seagrim. Another was an enthusiastic middle-aged officer in the Burma Frontier Service, H. N. C. Stevenson, then Assistant Superintendent at Kutkai in the Northern Shan States. Devoted to the cause of the hill peoples, he had spent all his life in the hills and had written a standard work on the Chins. Several months before Japan declared war, Stevenson, without waiting for government sanction, had begun the training of Kachin guerrillas in view of the then clear threat that Yunnan might defect from the central government in China and side with Japan. He was supported by the Commissioner of

the Shan States, who also encouraged other officers of the Frontier Service to raise levies from the Karens and the Lahus, the latter being a vigorous sub-tribe of the Shans.

Stevenson's methods of training and ingenious booby-traps and other devices so impressed a visiting Counsellor to the Governor of Burma, Sir Raibeart MacDougall, that, after the war started, the Governor, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, summoned him to Rangoon. Sir Reginald then appointed Stevenson to organise a Burma-wide levy force, gave him *carte blanche* to do the job, and persuaded the Commander-in-Chief, General Hutton, to try it out. It was Sir Reginald who insisted that levies be organised on a national scale. Although General Hutton gave his approval to the scheme, some of his senior staff-officers were less enthusiastic and resented what they regarded as 'civilian interference'. Stevenson received little help from them, but they put him in touch with Major P. D. Lindsay and the other officers of Oriental Mission.

It was the union of these two groups that was to produce such remarkable results. Stevenson had the local knowledge and a unique personal prestige with some of the tribes, especially the Chins and Kachins. Oriental Mission had the resources, the money and what arms and equipment were available. It was like putting a torch to petrol. The two groups fused, united by a common enthusiasm. The organisation they built up was the Burma Levies, commanded by Stevenson, at first a civilian organisation, later militarised and placed under the control of the G.O.C., Burma.

The first officer whom Stevenson asked for and had seconded to the Levies was Seagrim. He knew that Seagrim loved and trusted the Karens and already had a remarkable standing amongst them. The Karen country, then gravely threatened, had never been administered by the Frontier Service. Elsewhere throughout the hills the levy

organisations were raised, trained and led by Frontier Service officers.

When Japan declared war, Seagrim was not in Burma but in India, having just completed a course at Quetta. He did not distinguish himself particularly in this course and spent much of his time putting into final shape a personal anthology which he had compiled over a period of several years. He hurried back to Burma, was posted to the 12th battalion, and put in charge of the defence of Mingaladon airfield, the big airfield just outside Rangoon. There was a proposal to send him as staff-captain to a brigade in the Shan States, but he contrived to pull enough strings to remain with his battalion. As soon as he heard that Karen levies were going to be raised he wrote in to army headquarters asking to be allowed to volunteer for this work. Shortly afterwards he was contacted by Stevenson. It took some time to obtain his release, but eventually, early in 1942, permission came through from headquarters for him to be seconded to the Burma Levies.

The raising, training and use of a great army of Karen irregulars in the hills was a scheme dear to his heart, one which he had thought about intermittently ever since he had first arrived in Burma. At last the opportunity to put his ideas into practice seemed to have arrived.

Stevenson meanwhile had gone down to Moulmein, headquarters of the 17th Indian Division, a division that was to have a magnificent record in the war in the East, then vainly trying to accomplish the impossible task of preventing the Japanese advance from Siam into Burma, carried out with air monopoly and greatly superior numbers. The idea of raising irregulars and using them in an *offensive* role was still regarded with considerable suspicion by the army. It would be tedious to relate all the proposals and counter-proposals, all the staff conferences, many of them acrimonious, which took place against the exasperating background of steady retreat. Suffice

it to say that little was achieved. Permission was never granted for Stevenson's plan for a raid with a picked band of Karens across the frontier into Siamese territory to destroy installations on the then poorly defended Siamese airfield of Mae Sariang. The Japanese occupied it in due course and then used it as a forward base for their fighters, which strafed unmercifully our retreating columns on the Moulmein-Pegu road. Permission was granted, however, for Seagrim (who had arrived from Rangoon) to go up to Papun and organise a force of Karens, using as nucleus the fifty-five members of the Salween District military police. At a conference at Kyaikto the commander of the 17th Division, Major-General J. G. Smyth, V.C., told Seagrim that the risks would be considerable. He said he was very willing to face them. Discussion then centred on the best way of employing levies. It was decided that as the Moulmein-Pegu-Rangoon road and railway would undoubtedly become the main Japanese supply routes into Burma, the most useful thing the levies could do would be to make raids from the hills on these lines of communication.

About January 20, Seagrim, accompanied by Lieutenant Ronald Heath, of Oriental Mission, drove up to Papun taking with them a number of miscellaneous fire-arms which Stevenson had managed to collect in Rangoon and a few tommy-guns and grenades. Heath went back to Rangoon and took a small convoy up to Papun with about 200 Italian rifles and a few thousand rounds of ammunition, all that the army could allocate for the arming of the levies. The four jeeps in the convoy were driven by Heath and three other Oriental Mission officers. On their return journey to Rangoon they only just managed to get through before the road was finally cut by the Japanese.

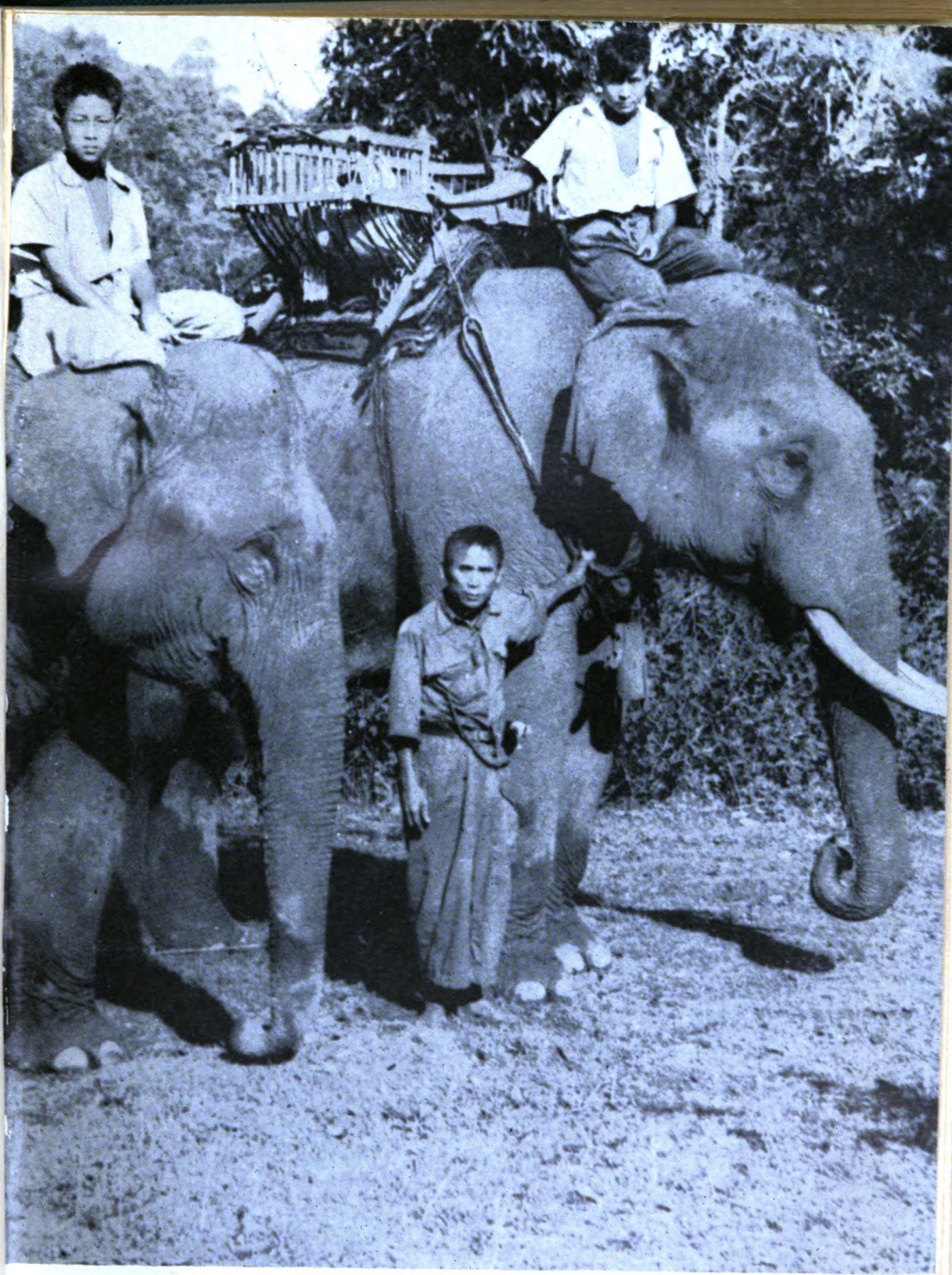
According to an officer who saw him at Kyaikto before he left for Papun, Seagrim was delighted that he was at last able to do what he wanted. He said that he was quite determined to stay behind, even if the British evacuated Burma.

It was 'a question of principle'. It had long been a favourite thesis of his that the British before the war were suffering from a general lack of principle. Because of it, he used to say, they deserved to lose the war.

Although it is the capital of Salween District, Papun is really little more than a small settlement on the banks of the Yunzalin river. Above it tower the mountain ranges of the Burma-Siam frontier, thickly covered with forest and bamboo thicket. Before the war there was a dry-weather road linking Papun with the main coastal Moulmein-Rangoon road, but during the rains the only means of communication with the outside world was down the Yunzalin river. It took the Chittagonian boatmen twelve days to pole and haul their sampans up the swollen torrent. The return journey took only a few hours. Plump at the beginning of the monsoon, these Chittagonian boatmen would be thin as rakes by the time it ended. Of the 53,000 people who live in Salween District, more than 45,000 are Karens. The population of Papun itself is mixed. In addition to Karens there are a few Burmans and a number of Shans, Indians, Gurkhas, and Chinese.

The offices of Deputy Commissioner and District Superintendent of Police in Salween District are always combined and for many years past it has been the custom to appoint an officer from the Burma Police, not from the Indian Civil Service or the Burma Frontier Service. In 1941 the post was occupied by George Chettle, Burma Police, who had been there for nearly four years. It was British rule of the old type, in which the D.C. was indeed the monarch of a little kingdom and the father and friend of his people. Apart from Chettle and his wife there were only two European residents, two French priests of the Missions Etrangères de Paris, Father Loizot, an old man who had opened up the Catholic mission in 1921, and Father Calmon, a younger man who came to





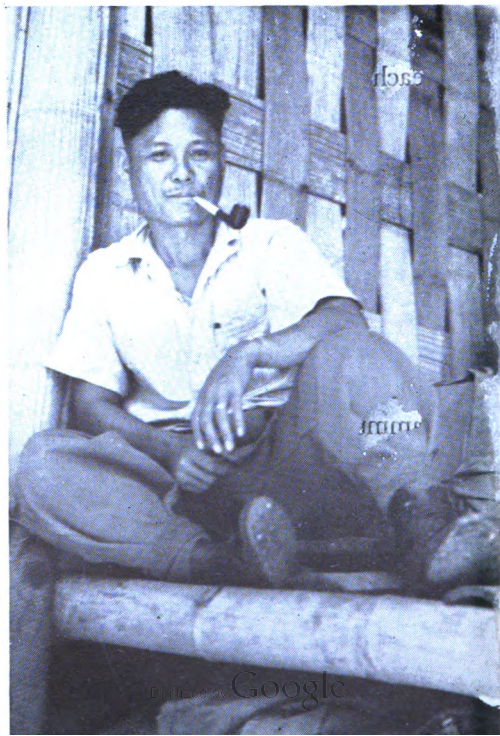
7. Saw Digay, on ground, with two of his elephants





8. (a) Thra May Sha and his wife

(b) Saw Po Myin,  
Police Station Officer  
at Pyagawpu



assist him in 1935. In an average year Papun might have half a dozen European visitors. Sometimes it would be the Commissioner of the Tenasserim Division, or a forest officer on tour, or, very rarely, a judge of the High Court. The work of the American Baptist Mission, which had many adherents, was now carried on entirely by Karen pastors and teachers. On two occasions before the war Papun was visited by the well-known American missionary 'Boh' Case. Son of an A.B.M. missionary, born and brought up in Burma and speaking Burmese better than most educated Burmans, he was an agricultural expert and ran the A.B.M. agricultural college at Pynmana. He came up to Papun in 1940, at Chettle's instance, and again in 1941, to try and promote terraced rice cultivation amongst the Karens. Two young Karens were sent down to the college and on their return they toured the villages lecturing and demonstrating. But it was slow work amongst these conservative hill people.<sup>1</sup>

When the Japanese declared war Chettle placed his fifty-five armed police and 200 civil police in a state of readiness, for the Siamese frontier was only twenty miles from Papun. At Dagwin Karen police and Siamese frontier guards faced each other across the Salween, occasionally exchanging shots. One night the Siamese crossed the Salween, attacked the police station, and killed the Karen inspector in charge. Further raids into the district were expected but did not occur.

On arriving at Papun Seagrim went to live in the Public Works Department bungalow and immediately called for volunteers. There was a good response and he soon had 200 recruits under training. The mornings were usually spent on an improvised range and Seagrim complained bitterly to Chettle about the number of misfires he had with the Italian ammunition. In the afternoon they would go out into the forests and practise tactics, especially ambushes. In the evenings he would give instruction on one of the football fields.

<sup>1</sup> Case later became a chaplain to the American forces in north Burma and was accidentally drowned in 1943 at Margareta in Assam.

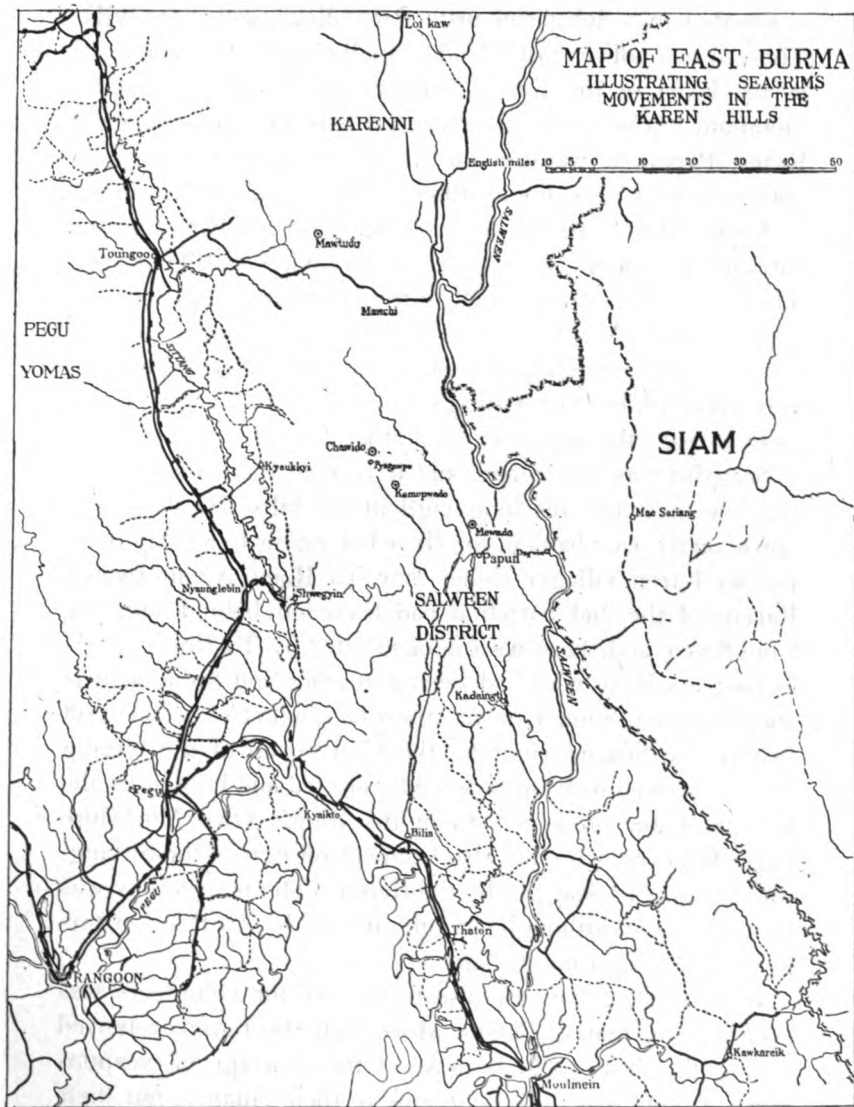
There was no drilling. Several times he enthused to Chettle about the progress which his Karen volunteers were making.

On the range Seagrim did not insist on the Karens 'adopting the prone position' or any of the other conventional firing positions. He held that a man fired straighter if he fired from the position that was most comfortable to him. With all eastern hill peoples this is the squatting position. (An officer recalls that Wingate during the 1943 Chindit operation said to him—'If you're in a tight corner, sit down and fire. Forget everything you ever learned about the other positions.'))

It is interesting to note the impression which Seagrim made on three men, Stevenson, Chettle and Heath. Stevenson says of him: 'He was an ascetic type, very dark. He looked as if he might have been a monk.' Chettle Seagrim impressed as 'a most unusual person, but a good soldier and a very stout fellow.' According to Chettle, he was convinced that the Japanese would go through Burma 'like a dose of salts', but he did not seem at all depressed at the prospect.

Heath's comments are interesting, for Heath was later to serve as a jungle training officer to another distinguished and equally unorthodox soldier, Orde Wingate, who at this time had just arrived in Burma at the summons of General Wavell and was making a quick survey of upper Burma. 'Both Seagrim and Wingate', says Heath, 'were determined men who knew their own minds. They could analyse a situation, take a decision and act on it without consulting others.' Both could do anything their men could do and would never dream of asking their men to do anything they could not or would not do themselves. Speaking of Seagrim, he says: 'Any of the Karen boys would have done anything for him. He had a terrific sway over those lads.'

After a few weeks at Papun Seagrim shifted his headquarters to a place called Pyagawpu, three days' march northwest of Papun, centre of a group of small Karen villages. It



is situated in a delightful little flat valley girdled by hills. There was a police station and a small church. It was deeper in the heart of the Karen country, inaccessible except by mountain tracks, and a more central base for organising the levies. Papun, it was obvious, with its motor road, would sooner or later be occupied either by the Japanese or Burmese.

About March 10 the 2nd battalion Burma Rifles passed through Pyagawpu on its way to Kyaukkyi and Toungoo.<sup>1</sup> They had with them ninety-three elephants carrying all their stores. A few days later Chettle passed through on his way to Kyaukkyi. He spent a night with Seagrim, who was 'cheerful, but not betting on his chances'. The last European to pass through was old Father Loizot.

Seagrim was now alone, and it is from this time perhaps that we may date his long vigil in the hills. He lived in a house on the east bank of the river belonging to a fairly prosperous Karen villager called Saw Ta Roe.<sup>2</sup> About twenty Karens of the 2nd battalion had been left behind suffering from fever, and these were looked after by Ta Roe's sister-in-law, a widow who had been a teacher and knew a little about nursing. Some Gurkha stragglers, who had been cut off east of the Sittang river by the blowing-up of the Sittang bridge, arrived in Pyagawpu and were fed and housed by the Karens. Later on a private of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, who had also been cut off east of the Sittang, was brought to Seagrim by the Karens. The poor fellow was badly sick and, although carefully nursed by Ta Roe's sister-in-law, he died a month later.

In Pyagawpu the response to the call for volunteers was even greater than at Papun. More than 800 Karens reported during the first week. Because of the shortage of weapons most of them had to be sent back to their villages, but their

<sup>1</sup> A detailed account of the movements and subsequent history of this distinguished unit will be found in Appendix 3 on page 212.

<sup>2</sup> All Karen men are called *Saw* and the women *Naw*. *Saw* is the equivalent of the Burmese *Maung*. Karens who have been to mission schools often take English names; sometimes, to our way of thinking, rather original ones. I have even heard of a Saw Napoleon and a Saw Porphyrio Po Ba.

names were all registered. The mornings, as at Papun, were devoted to training in the use and care of weapons, the afternoons to tactical training in the forest. One group would be detailed to act as the Japanese, another group as levies, and in this manner they would practise ambushes and other forms of attack and defence. The levies used to wear an arm-band with the letter K embroidered on it by their women-folk.

The levies were organised roughly as follows. Seagrim's lieutenant in the south, responsible for the area round Kadaingti, was a shock-headed forest ranger with a wry grin called Saw Willie Saw. In the centre, responsible for the Papun area, was a tough hard-drinking Karen with a tremendous squint, Saw Darlington, who had been at various times a teacher of carpentry at a Wesleyan mission school, a military policeman and a contractor. His lieutenant at Pyagawpu was a timber-contractor called Saw Digay, a man of considerable influence in that part of the country. Willie Saw had about nine sections, Darlington twenty sections, Digay eighteen sections. Each section consisted of about eleven men. A well-armed section might possess one tommy-gun with fifty rounds, two rifles with thirty rounds each, and perhaps four shot-guns with forty cartridges each. Some sections had more arms, some less. In all there were probably about 350 arms amongst Seagrim's levies. The sections were quartered on villages and the section commanders were usually Karens who had formerly served in the Burma Rifles. Levies were posted on all the tracks leading into the Karen country. There was an outer and an inner screen and, in each area, a central reserve which could be quickly moved to any desired point. The levy sections were charged with protecting their villages from dacoits, with helping soldiers who had been cut off, and, their primary task, with reporting intelligence to Seagrim by fast runner.

Seagrim was chronically short of arms and ammunition, but he never gave up trying to obtain more. He sent Ta Roe north to Mawchi mines to see if Captain Boyt, commanding

some of the Northern Karen Levies, could spare any arms. Mawchi is about fifty miles north of Pyagawpu. Its mines are the most important single source of wolfram in the world, producing 35 per cent of the Empire's and 10 per cent of the world's output. Boyt gave Ta Roe 150 12-bore shotguns and 1,000 cartridges, fifty 4.10s and 500 cartridges, and two boxes of grenades. He could not spare more, for a supply which he had been expecting from Toungoo had not arrived. Ta Roe asked the elders of a village near Mawchi whether they could give him some men to carry these arms down to Pyagawpu. The elders were only too glad to help and gave him seventy men.

At this point a word is necessary about the Northern Karen Levies.

After Stevenson had obtained the services of Seagrim for his Burma Levies, he cast round for other officers, with experience of the Karens, who could organise levies north of Salween District, up on the Toungoo-Mawchi road. The Karen hills extend north for several hundred miles and it was not possible for one man to organise levies through the whole territory. Two of Stevenson's early choices for work with the Karens were Noel Boyt, timber manager at Pyinmana for Steel Brothers, and H. C. Smith of the Burma Forest Service, then Conservator of Forests for the Sittang Circle. These two men left for Toungoo on February 26 (still as civilians) to organise levies on the Toungoo-Mawchi road. Smith took the area north of the road, establishing his headquarters at Thandaung and Leiktho, Boyt took the area south of the road, with headquarters at Mawchi. Smith, in a written report, says 'the appeal for recruits met with a great response. The patriotic fervour and loyalty shown by the Karens, especially the Protestants, reminded me of the atmosphere I have experienced at Armagh, Northern Ireland, on Orange Day, July 12'. The response from one officer was less warm. He

evidently thought it a boy-scout show and both Smith and Boyt went back to Toungoo. The divisional commander there took a different view, commissioned them on the spot, and sent them back.

More than 3,000 Karens were enrolled in the first two weeks. Weapons, however, were as short as they were further south and in all there were only about 250 available, mostly Italian rifles. Static levies were organised for village defence, but there was not time, owing to the speed of the Japanese advance, to organise mobile levies. The Mawchi road had been prepared for demolition, and one of the main tasks of the levies was to protect these prepared sites from forest fires which would have blown the bridges prematurely. When the Japanese started advancing up the road the levies did good work in reporting their movements. Sometimes they sat in trees counting the troops and vehicles. Sometimes they strolled down the road with hoes over their shoulders. Several of them, using the Karen cross-bow which is accurate up to seventy-five yards, killed Japanese sentries. Being noiseless, it was a useful weapon.

After the Japanese captured Toungoo, where the Chinese 5th Army put up a good fight, a Karen company which had fought its way out of Toungoo airfield was assigned to the Northern Karen Levies and took part in a spirited action on the Mawchi road. A glance at the map shows the strategic importance of this road, which is one of the main routes into the Shan States, by way of Mawchi, Loikaw and Taunggyi. In 1942 Karens performed a valuable service delaying the Japanese going *up* it. In 1945 they were to perform an even more valuable service delaying the Japanese coming *down* it.

The company, about 150 strong, was under the command of Captain A. B. L. Thompson, formerly of Steel Brothers, and held a strong Japanese vanguard for several hours at the twenty-eighth milestone, inflicting heavy casualties. Boyt, by dint of driving all night from Mawchi, arrived in time for the battle and both he and Thompson had narrow escapes, Boyt



being blown up (but only slightly injured) by a mortar bomb and Thompson having a dud bomb roll down the hill between his legs. When it became clear that they were greatly outnumbered and could no longer hold the Japanese, they withdrew up the road blowing all the bridges. This action, for which Thompson was later awarded the D.S.O. and Boyt the M.C., and the destruction of the bridges, delayed the Japanese for several days and gave the Chinese 6th Army time to prepare positions east and west of Mawchi where they fought stubbornly. Although Thompson and Boyt estimated that they killed only thirty Japanese, Karen villagers later reported counting more than eighty graves. When they occupied Mawchi the Japanese made propaganda amongst the people by saying that at the twenty-eighth milestone, they, a column of only 700 men, had vanquished and driven back the spear-head of the Chinese 6th Army.

Standing instructions at that time were that, when an area was overrun by the Japanese, officers were to make their way north, levies were to hide their arms, lie low and await the return of the British. Amongst the British officers who were then in this part of Burma and who made the long and arduous trek right across northern Burma into Assam, across lofty mountain passes which had rarely been crossed by white men before, were Boyt, Thompson, Chettle, Lindsay, and several others, including two young subalterns called Nimmo and McCrindle, who will appear later in this story. Stevenson reached Fort Hertz, so far north that it was never occupied by the Japanese. There he supervised the building of a landing strip, received some reinforcements, flew out to see General Wavell, but crashed on the return flight.

Boyt, when he was at Mawchi, had been in contact with Seagrim by runner. It was evident to him that Seagrim was completely out of touch with what was happening in Burma. In one letter he asked whether it was true that Rangoon and Moulmein had been recaptured by the British. All Burma was seething with fantastic rumours at that time. Just before

he left Mawchi, Boyt sent Seagrim a letter giving him the situation and telling him of a little-known easterly route into south Yunnan by which he could still make his way out if he wished to do so.

It is curious that Seagrim and Boyt, levy commanders in adjoining areas, never met during the war. Their only meeting had been way back in the cold weather of 1933-4 when Boyt was at his jungle camp at Kawkareik on the Siamese border. One day he saw a white man coming up to the camp, bearded and rather unkempt, carrying a knapsack. Behind him was a Karen boy carrying a shot-gun and another knapsack. Boyt thought it must be some beachcomber who had strayed inland and he was very surprised when the beachcomber introduced himself as Captain Seagrim of the Burma Rifles. He spent one night with Boyt and his wife, who thought him an amusing guest but decidedly odd. He was travelling through the Karen country, living with the people, learning their ways, doing a little shooting. It was certainly not the way officers in the Burma Rifles usually travelled.

Seagrim never wavered in his decision to stay behind with the Karens. In the last letter which his mother received from him, he told her of this decision. There was a chance, he said, that he would get through; if he didn't, he wanted 'to leave a memory with the Karens'. But although his resolution was unshaken, by April he was suffering greatly from the lack of preparation and equipment which had characterised the formation of all the Burma levies. Even more than by lack of arms and ammunition, lack of money, lack of medical stores, he was hampered by lack of means of communication with the outside world. Boyt at Mawchi was his only outside contact. Letters were taking days and often didn't arrive at all. About the middle of April he decided to go north and try to find army headquarters. The main purpose of this quest was to obtain a wireless receiver and transmitter. He understood

wireless and had once been a battalion signals officer. Secondary purposes were to obtain money and, if possible, more arms. Before leaving Pyagawpu he gave strict orders to the levies that, while they were to do everything they could to give the villagers protection from robbers, they were on no account to attack the Japanese. The latter were too strong and such action would only bring needless suffering to the Karens. At a meeting of the local Pyagawpu levies, he urged them to be of good heart and not to lose hope. The British would return to Burma and he himself would soon return to Pyagawpu.

He set out with Subadar<sup>1</sup> Ba Din; his orderly Po Gay; Havildar Saw Charlie, Havildar Tha U, Lance-Naik Ah Din, and eight riflemen of the 2nd battalion; two Kachin stragglers from the 4th battalion and seven Gurkha stragglers. Two days north of Pyagawpu, at a village called Lermuti, he left most of these men under the command of Havildar Charlie, telling them to wait until he came back from Mawchi. He evidently thought Mawchi was still in our hands. He carried on with Ba Din, Po Gay, Tha U, and a guide. Two days later they looked down on Mawchi from the mountains above and Seagrim could see through his binoculars that the Japanese had arrived.

They crossed the Mawchi road at midnight about three miles west of Mawchi itself. Before crossing they all knelt down, at Seagrim's instigation, and prayed silently. For the next seven days they made their way north by devious tracks in the general direction of Taunggyi. Progress was slow, for the guide had to reconnoitre all villages in advance to find if any Japanese were there. Tha U fell ill with fever and had to be left at a village. Seagrim himself was not too well and was suffering from fever. He was wearing khaki trousers, shoes, a Karen tunic and a woollen cap which he had bought

<sup>1</sup> In the Indian and Burma armies a 'subadar' is an Asiatic officer holding a commission, not from the King, but from the Viceroy or Governor. There is no exact equivalent in the British Army. A 'havildar' is a sergeant and a 'naik' a corporal.

in a village bazaar. He carried no rifle or revolver, only two grenades. He also carried two Bibles. The Karen pastors and elders looked after him and provided him with guides from village to village. To a certain pastor who helped him he gave the following certificate:

*This is to certify that Tbra<sup>1</sup> Sbwe Laye has assisted the British Government during the period February–April, 1942. He has given invaluable service in helping to raise Karen volunteers and has helped individual officers to return to their units. He has persuaded the Karens of the Mawcbi area to remain loyal to the British.*

*This man, by remaining loyal, has endangered his life. Being a Karen leader, the Japanese have offered a big reward for his capture. He could run away but is afraid that if he did so other Karens would suffer at the hands of the Japanese. He therefore prefers to remain with his people and accept the consequences.*

H. P. SEAGRIM, Capt., April 20.

To one of his guides called Saw Wnee he gave the following:

*This is to certify that Saw Wnee has been loyal to the British and has helped in the raising of the Karen volunteers. At the risk of his own life he helped me to pass through the Japanese lines near Mawcbi.*

H. P. SEAGRIM, Capt., April 21.

A few nights after crossing the road, at the house of a Karen *sawbwab*,<sup>2</sup> Seagrim met a Karen officer, Lieutenant Ba Thein, who had been with Smith and Boyt in the Northern Karen Levies. Ba Thein, before the war a forestry assistant with Macgregor and Company, joined the party.

On April 27, somewhere near Taunggyi, Seagrim decided to send Ba Din and Po Gay back to Pyagawpu to help with

<sup>1</sup> *Tbra* is the Karen word for pastor or teacher.

<sup>2</sup> The *sawbwabs* are the hereditary chieftains of the Shan States.

the levies. Both of the Karens wept at the parting. To Ba Din, Seagrim gave one of his two Bibles, saying: 'Only God can help us now.' He also gave him a certificate addressed to army headquarters and a personal letter. The certificate read:

*This is to certify that I have today released from service Sub. Ba Din, 2nd Bn. Burma Rifles and No. 7979 Rfn. Po Gay, 3rd Bn. Burma Rifles. I am sending these men back to volunteer H.Q., Pyagawpu (near Papun), where they will remain and work with the volunteers as long as the volunteers remain in operation.*

*I wish to state that these two men have shown great loyalty and have followed me for many miles in my search for A.H.Q.*

*They are NOT deserters, and as long as they remain with the volunteers they are performing the duties of soldiers, and I have on my own responsibility told them that their service with the volunteers will count as Military Service.*

H. P. SEAGRIM.

*April 27, 1942, near Taunggyi.*

The personal letter read:

*I wish to thank you very much for following me faithfully for so many miles in search of H.Q.*

*It is I think better for you to return to Pyagawpu and try to help the volunteers and get the Karens united.*

*Some day the British will return and then the Karens must do great things.*

*Many thanks and good luck to you.*

H. P. SEAGRIM, *Capt.*

Seagrim carried on with Ba Thein and a guide. A few days later they were ambushed by Shan bandits. Ba Thein was killed. Seagrim escaped. He made his way south and came to a village called Mawtudo.

For the next four months he was hidden by two Karen pastors in a small hut in the forest near Mawtudo.

## CHAPTER 5

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For a time we must leave Seagrim in the forest at Mawtudo and trace what was happening further south in Salween District. On March 21 a large detachment of the Burma Independence Army had arrived in Papun. The events which followed upon the arrival of this force not only in Papun but in other Karen districts in Burma have had a vital bearing on the course of Burman-Karen relations and they are worth chronicling in some detail. They illustrate what happens in a plural society in Asia when the central authority is suddenly removed and majorities and minorities are left 'to fight it out amongst themselves'.

The Burma Independence Army, and its various successors, have played an important part in recent Burmese history, politically rather than militarily, and the story of its origins is not without an interest of its own, apart from its relationship to the Karen story. Starting as the B.I.A., or Burmese Independence Army, it was known to the British in India as the B.T.A., or Burma Traitor Army. In 1943 it was reformed by Dr. Ba Maw's administration to become the B.D.A., or Burma Defence Army. In 1945, when it came over to the British side it was calling itself the B.N.A., or Burma National Army, and then acquired the initials P.B.F., or Patriotic Burmese Forces. Late in 1945, after the war was over, part of it was incorporated into the new British-trained regular Burma Army, and part of it formed the nucleus of a powerful private army called the P.V.O., or People's Volunteer Organisation, commanded by a young Burman called Aung San. It was he who had created and led the original Burma Independence Army.

Aung San was born on February 13, 1915, in the township of Natmauk in the oil-fields of Yenanyaung in central Burma. His father was a moderately prosperous landowner. A grand-uncle on his mother's side had been a prominent leader of the resistance movement in Upper Burma after it was annexed by the British in 1885-6. He was educated at the local vernacular school, the Yenanyaung High School, and went up to Rangoon University with the intention of trying to join the Indian Civil Service. The university was a hotbed of nationalist politics and Aung San soon plunged into the students' political movements. He became editor of *Oway*, the organ of the Rangoon University Students' Union, and later vice-president and president of the Union. He was one of the founders of the All-Burma Students' Union and its second and third president. He was rusticated for an article in *Oway* and this led to the country-wide students' strike of 1936. The quarrel was patched up, but before leaving the university he was again threatened with expulsion for his political activities. He obtained his B.A. degree in History and Political Science, but never completed the Law course which he had intended to do.

In October 1938 Aung San joined the Thakin Party, became its organising secretary, and after three months was appointed its general secretary. The Thakin Party or Dobama Asi-Ayon (Burma National League) had been formed in 1936 and comprised most of the younger active political elements in Burma. It had a vaguely Communist ideology (its emblem was the hammer and sickle), a revolutionary fascistic technique, including a small political army, and it was permeated with an ultra-nationalist spirit. As general secretary of this party, Aung San helped to organise the strikes and disturbances of 1938-9 and for a time was detained in gaol. When war broke out in 1939, he became acting secretary of the so-called Freedom Bloc, which claimed to be willing to co-operate in the war with the British if satisfactory assurances were given regarding

Burma's political future. In 1940 Aung San led the Thakin delegation to the meeting at Ramgarh in India of the Indian National Congress. There he met Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

On returning to Rangoon from India he heard that the Thakin Party was about to be declared an illegal organisation. As general secretary he was certain to be arrested and he decided to go underground. At that time he had no intention of going abroad or of seeking help from any foreign power. He had discussed the matter with Nehru who had said that if a country striving for independence accepted help from a foreign power its immediate task might be easier but worse complications might follow. Nationalists in every country, said Nehru, must rely primarily on their own efforts inside the country. Aung San was thinking in terms of a country-wide civil disobedience campaign, refusal to pay taxes, general strikes, the secret organisation of saboteurs, etc. One of his friends discussed the question of Aung San's plans with Dr. Ba Maw, first premier of Burma under the British and later premier of Burma under the Japanese. The latter was in touch with the Japanese consul-general in Rangoon and he advised Aung San to board a Japanese steamer which was in port, and seek help from Japan. Aung San was not particularly keen to go to Japan. Of Burma's neighbours China and India were the two with which Burmese nationalists were most in sympathy. Escape to India was impossible in view of the fact that India too was administered by the British, so Aung San tried to get up into China. A member of the Burmese goodwill mission which had visited Chungking in 1940 had established contact with certain left-wing Chinese circles and had made arrangements for other Burmese to go up there secretly. On his return, unfortunately, this member of the mission forgot the passwords that were to be used. Despite this Aung San decided to go up to China by the Burma highway. But just about that time the British Government closed the road for three months and it



looked as if that avenue of escape, too, was closed. In the meantime one of his friends had contacted some Chinese seamen on a Norwegian ship who made a profitable business by smuggling opium and contraband and also refugees from the law desirous of escaping from one country to another. Aung San was smuggled aboard this ship in August, 1940, disguised as a member of the crew. The ship went straight to Amoy on the coast of China. Also aboard, but unknown at that time to Aung San, was a certain Japanese agent called Dr. Kuboku who had spent more than twenty years in Burma.

At Amoy the Chinese smugglers took Aung San ashore to their contact man there, a certain Chinese inn-keeper living in Kulangsu, the international settlement. There was nearly a crisis over passports. A Chinese policeman demanded to see Aung San's papers. He had no papers at all. But the inn-keeper took the policeman aside, gave him a substantial bribe and the matter was dropped.

Aung San intended to make his way overland to Chungking despite the length of the journey. But the Chinese had difficulty in smuggling him across the boundary of the international settlement and he stayed at the inn for nearly a month. Meanwhile the Japanese consul-general in Rangoon had heard from his Burmese friends that Aung San had left on a steamer bound for Amoy and he sent details, including a photograph, to the Japanese authorities in Amoy. One day a young Japanese civilian came round to see him in the inn at Kulangsu and arranged for him to be moved to the Japanese-occupied part of Amoy where he would be much safer than in an area for whose administration the British consul was partly responsible. Aung San's views on Japan at that time were confused. There had been much anti-Japanese propaganda in Burma by the British, much anti-British propaganda by the Japanese. He had read in Burmese Freda Utley's *Japan's Feet of Clay* and Vespa's *Secret Agent of Japan* and, on the other side, *Japan Must Fight Britain*



9. (a) The church at Pyagawpu

(b) Elephants crossing a stream in the Karen hills







by a Japanese naval officer. On the whole the Burmese, because distrustful of the British, were more disposed to believe the Japanese propaganda. Young intellectuals like Aung San had a sympathy for China's fight for freedom, and yet China was being supported by, and accepting the help of, Great Britain. While critical of Japan as an extreme fascist country, the young intellectuals could not but admire her achievements, and Japan was the avowed enemy of the white man in Asia. To the young Burmese left-wing revolutionaries the issues of the war did not appear as clear-cut as they did later when Germany attacked Russia. So it was with mixed feelings and a confused mind that Aung San first came into contact with the Japanese.

They sent him by sea to Taihoku in Formosa. A few days later, wearing European clothes for the first time in his life, he left by plane for Japan, travelling under the name of Monji Omota (the latter being another reading of the ideographs for Burma). After stops at Naha on Okinawa Island and Fukuoka in Kyushu the plane reached Haneda airport at Tokyo where he was met by a Japanese civilian who introduced himself as Mr. Suzuki.

Colonel Suzuki alias Colonel Minami (Minami means South in Japanese) alias Boh Gyo (in Burmese 'The Thunderbolt') was a regular army officer who was reputed to have won the Emperor's sword as the best cadet at the Military Academy.<sup>1</sup> During the First Great War he served for a time on the Russian border. His English was passable. He looked after Aung San, questioned him at great length, took him out to restaurants and to his home in Hamamatsu, and introduced him to officers of the General Staff. Aung San realised that the Japanese were trying him out, seeing what stuff he was made of, what use could be made of him. Only once did Suzuki let fall a hint that the Japanese might invade Burma, by way of the Shan States, but there was much talk about terrain, routes, conditions inside Burma, and it was

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 5, page 220.

obvious that the Japanese had plans in existence for such an invasion. (Suzuki sounded out Aung San on the possibility of restoring the Burmese monarchy, which is interesting, for after the Japanese occupied Burma they again tried to persuade the Burmese to adopt a monarchic rather than a republican form of government.)

After several weeks a plan was drawn up. The Japanese would give a maximum of thirty young Burmans military training and would arm and equip in Siam, as soon as it should become possible, a force of Burmans not exceeding a regiment, about 4,000 men. Supposing the Japanese were to invade Burma, this force would be allowed to administer Tenasserim, and when Rangoon was occupied form a provisional government, to be followed later by a constituent assembly. The political assurances, however, were phrased in the loosest and vaguest way.

Aung San returned to Burma to recruit thirty young men and convey these proposals to the nationalist leaders. He travelled non-stop in a Japanese ship from Yokohama to Bassein, in the Delta, arriving there at the beginning of March, 1941. He had no difficulty in eluding the British authorities and went to Rangoon by train. (It is not true, as is sometimes said, that his face was operated on in Japan to change his appearance.) He carried no documents and had memorised the plan and its salient points. The young nationalists were either in gaol, underground, or in jobs which appeared to the authorities to be harmless. Some of the thirty recruits went by sea to Bangkok, with the connivance of the Japanese, some crossed the frontier. They were taken to Hainan Island and then to Formosa where they were put through an intensive course of military training along with young Japanese officers, some of them naval officers. The intention was that some should go back to Burma as soon as possible to organise secret partisan forces, the rest would accompany the Japanese if and when they invaded Burma.

Aung San spent only ten days in Burma and left on a Japanese ship from Rangoon for Siam. Thence he went to Japan. Although the acknowledged commander and leader of the thirty Burmans, he spent most of the next few months in Japan, and travelling between Japan, China, Indo-China and Siam. The Japanese were now, March, 1941, talking to him openly of war in the south. Singapore was their main goal. Once Malaya had been occupied the Japanese forces engaged would be turned north towards Burma.

In Tokyo Aung San found that a bureau headed by Colonel Suzuki, known in English as the 'Minami Organ', had been established to deal with all affairs relating to Burma. It was originally supposed to be a joint body composed of army and navy officers and Foreign Office officials. The latter were never allowed to come in on it and after a few months all the naval members were withdrawn. The origin of this army-navy dispute was as follows. Dr. Kuboku, the Japanese agent in Burma, whose name has already been mentioned, had once been in the navy. He was forced to resign after reaching the rank of lieutenant for having struck a superior officer. Then he went to Burma as an agent and lived there for about twenty years, his wife practising as a dentist, he himself calling himself a doctor and doing a little trading. Many of his old naval contemporaries were now admirals and influential men. Kuboku wanted to head this bureau and he had the backing of the navy. For the navy, which had long advocated the 'southern' policy as opposed to the army's 'continental' policy, looked upon Burma and Malaya as their preserve. The army, however, won this battle and Suzuki was appointed to head the bureau. Also in the 'Minami Organ', in the uniform of an army officer, was a Japanese called Nagai who had spent several years in Burma as a Buddhist monk.

Aung San and others were called from time to time to Tokyo and did a lot of what Suzuki called 'map-fighting', i.e. studying campaigns on the map, the Japanese making

full use of the Burmanis' knowledge of the terrain. Plans were also made with Suzuki for the dumps of arms and ammunition that were to be made available to the Burmese.

Some of the thirty Burmese were clamouring to be allowed to go back to Burma to start the secret organisation of guerrillas. Eventually Suzuki, on his own responsibility, sent six down to Siam. The army, fearful perhaps of security, ordered them to stop in Siam. Suzuki sent two back to Japan but the other four carried on. Two were arrested by the Siamese when trying to cross the frontier, the two others succeeded in entering Burma.

As soon as the Japanese occupied Siam in December, 1941, these Japanese-trained young Burmans started recruiting in Siam for their 'Burma Independence Army'. Since Siam has always been something of a sanctuary for refugees from justice in Burma, the first recruits were not too savoury a collection and the criminality which they represented was unfortunately to characterise the B.I.A. as a whole. They were divided into four groups. One group accompanied the Japanese forces to Victoria Point, the most southerly point of Burma. A second group went to Tavoy and then came up the coast with the Japanese. The main group, including Aung San and Suzuki, took the main route across country to Moulmein. A fourth group entered Burma at Messow. They recruited as they went and were joined, as was only to be expected, not only by political sympathisers, but by large numbers of rogues and ne'er-do-wells. By the time Rangoon was occupied they numbered about 4,000 in the Rangoon area alone and probably between 20,000 and 30,000 in the whole of Burma. They had no uniforms and wore arm-bands of red, yellow and green stripes with the peacock superimposed. The Japanese supplied them with some arms and they were given free access to police guns and captured British arms. They acted as guides to the Japanese, provided them with useful intelligence, and killed a good number of British, Indian and Gurkha stragglers. As the British withdrew,



11. (a) Saw Digay's wife and  
unmarried niece

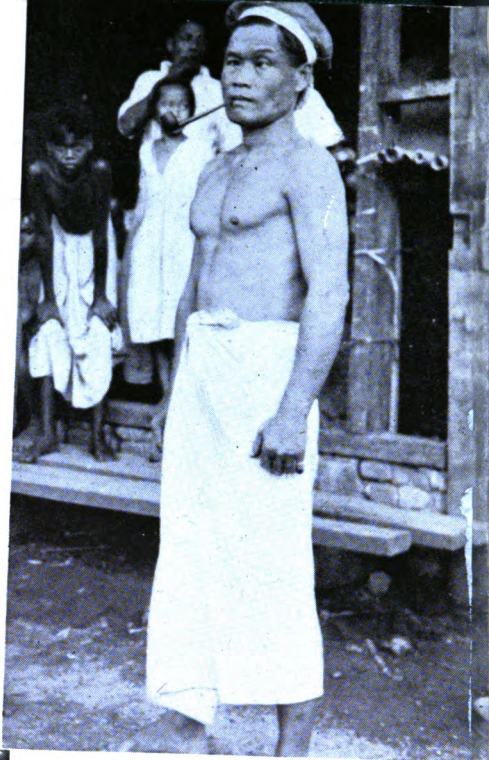


(b) A Karen village headman  
wearing the curious carapace  
with which the Karens ward  
off the rain when working  
on the hillsides





12. (a) Saw Darlington



(b) The headman of a  
Mewado village

thousands of miscreants were released from the gaols. These flocked to the standard of the B.I.A.

The term B.I.A. suggests an army. In reality it was little more than a horde of undisciplined riff-raff. Many Burmese joined the B.I.A. or started to call themselves Thakins because it gave them power, others because they hoped thereby to protect themselves and their property, others because they were out for loot and saw an opportunity of looting under a cloak of legality. Such were the oppressions of the B.I.A. that it was not many months before the Japanese themselves suppressed it, or rather weeded out its worse elements and reorganised it as the Burma Defence Army under Dr. Ba Maw's administration with a strong lacing of Japanese officers and N.C.O.'s.

The Burman is a pleasant fellow, intelligent, amusing, courteous, easy-going. It is striking that nearly all Englishmen who have spent their lives in Burma look back to the country and its people with affection. But he is strangely impulsive and excitable. Dacoity (armed gang robbery by five persons or more) is an established custom sanctioned by tradition. Every young village Burman loves to dash into a village firing off a gun, terrifying the inhabitants, helping himself to a few things he wants. It makes him a man. It gives him prestige with the girls. Greed is not the motive, but rather the love of excitement, the thrill of crime. The explanation of the Burmese character is probably to be found in the ease with which life can be supported in the Irrawaddy valley. The over-population, the fierce struggle for existence, which have given the Chinese their national characteristics of industry and thrift, do not obtain in Burma. The Burmese provide an example of a Mongoloid people who have been conditioned by centuries of easy living in a rich land beneath a warm sun.

The B.I.A. arrived at Papun on the evening of March 21. There were about 150 of them, mostly young Burmese village boys from the south. They were commanded by one

Further south, in Willie Saw's area, there was also fighting between the levies and the B.I.A. A B.I.A. detachment occupied the small township of Kadaingti and exactly the same trouble arose. The B.I.A. forced the Karens to give them rice and food and, moreover, told the people that they had permission from the Japanese to kill all Christians. They made the Karen Christians do reverence to Buddhist monks, several of whom accompanied them. The first levy attack on Kadaingti, made at night, accomplished little and of course resulted in reprisals against the Karens. In April Seagrim sent down six well-armed sections. The Karens learned through their spies that while the B.I.A. posted guards at night and in the morning and evening, they posted none in the middle of the day when it was broiling hot and when they felt sure no one would dream of attacking them. So the levies attacked at noon, killed several B.I.A., and forced the rest to flee south.

By the end of May there were no B.I.A. and hardly any Burmese left in the whole of Salween District. Many Karen villages had been burned down and, except in the remoter ranges, the Karens lived in little temporary settlements in the forest, very hard up for food, wondering uneasily what the future would bring forth.

Although the behaviour of the B.I.A. was primarily responsible for this tragic state of affairs, the Karens themselves were by no means blameless. The breakdown in authority which gave full scope to Burmese undesirables gave scope to Karen undesirables too. The history of the Karens during the war years is not free from the stains of murder, robbery and arson. The leading merchant of Papun, a Sikh called Ram Singh, was murdered by Karens, ostensibly on the grounds that he had helped the B.I.A. in Papun (the poor man could do very little else and secretly he helped several Karens with money), but by many it is thought that Ram Singh's herd of elephants was not unconnected with the motive behind his murder. One of Seagrim's levy commanders

in the south was by many Karen villagers regarded as little more than a dacoit who oppressed the people and extorted money and goods from them. On several occasions Karens, in the pursuit of private ends or personal grudges, denounced their fellows to the Japanese as agents of the British, or to the levies as agents of the Japanese. Poor Father Calmon, doing his utmost for the Karens, was enmeshed in petty feuds and jealousies. Baptist Karens even began to line up against Catholic Karens. Most of his time was spent in trying to unite the rival factions. It was the factiousness of children, but children armed with guns and grenades. Seagrim, too, was to have to contend with it.

The spring and summer of 1942 was not a happy period in the Karen hills.

## CHAPTER 6

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The two Karens who looked after Seagrim in the north were Thra May Sha, pastor of Mawtudo village, and Thra Kyaw Lay, pastor of Ubo village, four miles away. Both were graduates of the Baptist seminary at Insein. Both, in the early part of 1942, had played a prominent part in the raising of the Northern Karen Levies. They built three huts for Seagrim, each about one mile from the other, deep in the forest near Mawtudo.

For the best part of the next three years Seagrim lived in simple Karen huts, and to describe one of them is to describe them all. They were of the type which the Karens erect on their *taungyas* or in their paddy-fields when they are specially busy with their cultivation and leave their villages to go and live in the fields. This simple type of hut they call a *deb*, as distinct from the *bi* or village house, which is a larger and more permanent structure although built of the same materials in the same manner.

The reader must picture a small hut constructed almost entirely of bamboo. The foundations on which it rests are stout bamboo posts five inches in diameter planted in the ground. The cross-bars are affixed to these uprights with strips of bamboo or bark from the tree known as *shaw*. The floor is raised about four feet above the ground and is composed of bamboo poles which have been split and rolled open, the partitions being removed. These poles form in effect lengths of planking about eighteen inches in width and a quarter of an inch in thickness, and are used for the walls as well. The roof is formed either of the leaves of a palm called *dbani* or else of lengths of bamboo, like long drain-pipes split longitudinally in half, arranged in such a manner

that the water runs down them and off the eaves. At one end of the hut is a little veranda with a ladder propped up against it. In all, the hut is perhaps twelve feet long, ten feet wide, and, inside, about five and a half feet in height.<sup>1</sup>

Underneath the hut there is a fire-place and a pile of fire-wood. Inside the hut, too, there is a fire-place, an oblong tray on the floor filled with sand. An earthen pot for boiling water or cooking rice rests on three large stones and the smoke from the fire goes up through the roof, blackening the poles above the fire-place. In one corner of the hut is rice in a bamboo jar and a few vegetables in a woven basket brought on his last visit by Thra May Sha. Cooking and eating utensils are simple and all made of bamboo—cups, plates, spoons. Against the wall stand two or three bamboo water containers which Seagrim's boys have brought up the hill from a nearby stream, taking the weight of the containers with straps of *shaw* on their foreheads. (At Mawtudo he had three Karens and two Kachins living with him, all Burma Riflemen who had become cut off from their units during the campaign.) The fire is rarely allowed to go out, for matches are scarce and neither Seagrim nor the others are particularly adept with the hill Karen's flint and steel. At night it lights the hut and during the cold months of December and January it gives heat as well. In another corner lies an old blanket, coarse and worn, given to Seagrim by a Karen villager, and near it, on the floor, his well-thumbed Bible. And that is all. Outside, a barely perceptible track, known only to Thra May Sha, Thra Kyaw Lay and a few trusted others, leads down the hill-side in the direction of Mawtudo. All round the hut are the tall trees of the forest, the man-high scrub of bush and bamboo thicket, the rustling carpet of dry leaves.

At about five it becomes light and the Karen boys get up and start to talk and boil some hot water or, if there is any, some tea. Life in the hills begins and ends with the light. The birds sing at first light quite as lustily as they do on an

<sup>1</sup> The photograph opposite page 17 illustrates a typical *deb*.

English spring morning, and often there is the crowing of the jungle cock, ancestor of our own barnyard fowl, or the clucking of his hens, to give the illusion of the nearness of civilisation. Sometimes during the day the curious hollow screaming of a band of Rhesus monkeys echoes round the valley as they follow their regular routes through the forest. But it is the noise of insects rather than of birds which is loudest on the ear. Hundreds of cicadas, crickets and other small creatures combine to produce a whirring, whistling, buzzing, which is a never-ceasing background to life in the forest. Towards the middle of the day, and in the rainy season between showers, it becomes positively deafening. The mosquitoes in the Karen hills, although highly malarious, are only troublesome at certain times of the year, particularly during the rains. More troublesome during the rains, however, if one is obliged to move about and travel along the mountain paths, are the blood-sucking leeches, obscene little things from a quarter to one and a half inches long, standing up on their anal sucker and waving about in gleeful anticipation, waiting to fasten on the flesh of man or beast. Narrow worms before gorging, they become fat as garden slugs when full of blood. Although not poisonous, the weals which they leave easily become infected.

In fine weather brilliantly-hued butterflies flit through the little clearing, and dragon-flies with bright scarlet or iridescent blue bodies. Many small birds hop through the branches and lizards rustle in the leaves on the ground. The surrounding forest is full of animals, but they evade human habitation. Only the wild forest pigs sometimes come grunting about the hut at night. Fine eating these wild pigs, and, being root-eaters, they are comparatively clean, unlike their scavenging offal-eating relatives of the hill villages. Shy and secret beasts are the lordly sambhur with his magnificent antlers, the small dog-like barking-deer, the bears and the wild dogs and cats. Tigers are rare in this part of Burma, and elephants are found not at all. Snakes, too, are



13. (a) Thra Kyaw Lay



(b) Lieutenant Motoichi Inoue





14. (a) The Mawchi Road



(b) Operation Character. View from the mine camp at Mawchi.  
Colonel Peacock in the foreground

rare and might be seen only about once a month. Leopards are fairly common.

For a few days or weeks to live in such a hut amid such surroundings might be accounted good fortune, but not if one were confined to it for months on end with an indefinite prospect ahead. Then even the most beautiful sylvan dwelling might start to savour of the prison. It was not safe for Seagrim to move about much, and the secret of his whereabouts was known only to a few trusted men. At times, we know, the prolonged monotony became so irksome that, despite the risks, he would go out to the *taungyas* and help the astonished peasants with their clearing or planting or reaping.

At the camp he and the Karens ate twice a day, morning and evening. Rice was the main, sometimes the only, item in their diet. Thra May Sha tried to bring up chickens and meat, vegetables and fruit, whenever he could, but at that time the villages north of the Mawchi road were very short of food. On more than one occasion Seagrim and his companions were obliged to eat rats, the wild rat which lives in the bamboo thickets and eats bamboo shoots, a cleaner animal than the common rat. Mawtudo was not a healthy place and Seagrim suffered intermittently from fever all the time he was there. Fortunately when he first arrived he had been able to send down to Pyagawpu for his medical kit and he had a small store of quinine.

Thra May Sha and other Karens came up to see him several times a week. They would bring him the latest news, or rather the latest rumours, of what the B.I.A. were doing to the Karens, what the Japanese were doing in the plains, the course of the war, the shortage of goods, the change in currency, the prospects for the next harvest.

The Karens tried to get English books for Seagrim and a Karen educational officer in Nyaunglebin sent him up a Collected Works of Shakespeare, Sir San C. Po's *Burma and the Karens*, Smeaton's *The Loyal Karens of Burma* and two or three Baptist theological works. But the Bible was

his great stand-by. He later told a Karen friend that during his time in the hills he had read it right through, from cover to cover, twelve times. Every evening, before turning in they had prayers round the fire. Seagrim would read a passage from the Bible in English, expound it to the Karen boys in Burmese, and then they would say the Lord's Prayer. With Thra May Sha and Thra Kyaw Lay he often discussed religious themes. He would sometimes write out passages from the Bible, give them to these Karen pastors, ask them to think about them and, on their next visit, to give him their interpretations. He once amused Thra May Sha by pointing out a passage in the Old Testament which referred to the impending destruction of a large number of captains. He himself, he said, had fortunately been given the temporary rank of major, so he ought to be quite safe.

It is easy to understand how the thoughts of a man like Seagrim became, in these days, when he had so much time for solitary contemplation, increasingly preoccupied with Christianity. He was obviously a man with a great, if previously undeveloped, capacity for religious experience and he had always had a deep philosophic interest in religion. In these days his thoughts seem to have gone back to the simple Christianity of the Norfolk village where he was brought up, a village after all where problems, at bottom, were little different from those in a village on the Salween, the simple Christianity which his father had preached and practised. Whereas he had previously thought of the Bible as 'the finest literature in the world', it was now all that and something more as well, a repository of wisdom and truth and a great source of strength.

Even more than his character and personality, it was this religious side to Seagrim's nature, his Christianity, which made such a deep and lasting impression on the Karens. They had known American missionaries. Americans, in the minds of these simple people, were either teachers or pastors. Englishmen were either officials who administered the

country or business men who made money. They had never known an Englishman, let alone an officer in the British Army, who read the Bible and liked to talk about Christianity with them and prayed each evening and exhorted them to find strength through prayer.

Seagrim at Mawtudo never once talked about going north or trying to make his way out of Burma. He was always cheerful. As soon as he recovered from his malaria he set about organising an underground movement. Thra May Sha took on the task of keeping him supplied with food. Thra Kyaw Lay, a younger man, acted as the outside contact and chief gatherer of news. Seagrim told him to secretly get in touch with as many old Karen soldiers of the Burma Rifles as he could and tell them that there was a friend among them but not, as yet, to divulge his name. A secret register of these soldiers was drawn up and preliminary plans made for a guerrilla organisation that would help the British troops when they returned.

In June Seagrim sent Thra Kyaw Lay down to Pyagawpu to find out how the levies in the south were faring. He also gave him a small bag containing a message to India, with instructions that whenever a British plane flew over Pyagawpu the letters KV (Karen Volunteers) were to be laid out in strips of white cloth on an open patch of ground. The bag was to be attached to a cord strung above the ground between two poles. It was hoped that any British plane which flew over would see the letters, would come down to investigate and possibly try to hook up the cord with bag attached. Thra Kyaw Lay waited patiently at Pyagawpu for three months, but never a British plane did he see, only a few Japanese planes. While down there he sold, on Seagrim's instructions, three government elephants to obtain money to distribute to the levies. The purchasers were told that if the government wanted the elephants back after the war they would have to sell them back at the price, 1,000 rupees each, which they had given for them.

In December Seagrim sent a Karen down to Pyagawpu with a letter for Ta Roe, the villager at whose house he had stayed in March and April. Mawtudo, he said in this letter, was unhealthy and there was not enough food. He wanted, if Ta Roe and the other elders could arrange it, to come and live in Pyagawpu.

The elders were agreeable and Ta Roe sent two of his elephants north to bring Seagrim down. Thra Kyaw Lay accompanied him part of the way south from Mawtudo. He spent one night on the way with an Anglican Karen priest called Francis Ah Mya. Francis, who had been a close associate of the Bishop of Rangoon, the Right Reverend George West, had become interested in the Oxford Group Movement. He and Seagrim spent nearly the whole night talking, Seagrim being keenly interested in listening to Francis explain the ideas behind the Group Movement. Early the following morning, before continuing his journey, Seagrim received Holy Communion.

On December 5 he arrived at Chawido, the small village near Pyagawpu where Ta Roe was now living. He was bare-foot and bearded, thin and haggard, but in great spirits. He was wearing the Karen tunic which he always wore in the hills. He had a tommy-gun and pistol but no other possessions besides his Bible and a blanket, no spare clothes, no mosquito-net. With him were some Karens and the two Kachins.

Seagrim wanted to stay with Ta Roe in Chawido village. But Ta Roe was quite firm. 'It is not safe for you to stay here. Strangers sometimes come to this village. They may spread the word that you are here. You must go and live in the forest. We will build you a hut and keep you supplied with food. If there is anything you want, whatever it may be, you must send one of your men to me and I will send it to you.' So Ta Roe and some of the villagers built him a small hut in a dense part of the forest a few miles east of Chawido and laid in a supply of rice, salt, oil and vegetables.

But Seagrim seems to have found life in the forest too boring, and after one month he insisted on going to stay in Pyagawpu, in Ta Roe's old house on the east bank of the stream. Ta Roe used to see him every Sunday when he went to church at Pyagawpu. About seventy people used to attend. Seagrim sat with the elders up in front, facing the choir. Sometimes he himself would preach in Burmese. Sometimes he would write out his thoughts and then ask one of the Karens who understood English to translate them into Karen and give them to the congregation.

In their talks together Seagrim often talked about the Bible. 'We must not be downcast, Ta Roe. We are Christians. After the war I don't want to go on being a soldier. I want to become a missionary and work amongst the Karens. I have lived with them now so long that I would like to go on living with them always. I want to devote my life to the Karens.' He was always cheerful, always, in Ta Roe's quaint English, 'smiley-faced'.

Ta Roe kept him supplied with food, and when any villagers went to see him they took him presents of eggs and chickens and vegetables. He was in much better health than he had been at Mawtudo and started to put on weight. He kept in close touch with the levies by messenger and letter, but the time was not yet ripe for organising any anti-Japanese activity. It would have been a one-sided conflict and would only have involved the Karens in needless suffering. All he could do for the present was to wait patiently and bide his time.

This Ta Roe, in many ways a typical Karen, slow, stubborn, single-minded, was one of Seagrim's most devoted followers. He was born in 1911, his father being a well-to-do cultivator near Pyagawpu. He went to school, first to the Anglo-vernacular school in Pyagawpu, whose classes are held in the church, and then to the Baptist Mission school in Shwegyin. After leaving school he served for four years in the armed police in Salween District. He left the police in

1937 and went to live near Pyagawpu and worked as a cultivator with his three brothers. Their father left them two elephants (the true measure of wealth in the Karen hills) and they bought four more. Between harvest and planting all four brothers would go down into the plains with their elephants and do forest-work as sub-contractors.

Although Ta Roe, his wife and one of his brothers were Christians, the old father and two other brothers still clung to the animistic beliefs of their forefathers. Christian and animist Karens lived quite happily together in the little village of Chawido. At certain seasons the latter would carry out their observances and seek the continued favour of the guardian spirits of their homes. Sometimes it would be thought that a spirit had fled from a house. Then offerings of rice and betel would be placed at the foot of the ladder outside and all the villagers would be summoned and they would shout and beseech the spirit to return. If it was thought that their supplications had been successful, a great feast would follow. Pigs would be killed, and goats and chickens also, and they would all eat, and drink the Karen rice-wine which is called *thib*, and make merry all day and all night. (The Christian Karens, although taking part in the festivities, were not supposed to drink.) Sometimes once a year, sometimes twice, there would be the ceremony known as 'eating the spirit'. On the first day the house would be cleared and the family would eat nothing all day. On the second day a pig would be killed and all would put on their best Karen dress. After the pig had been cooked, first the father would eat; when he had finished, the mother would eat; then the eldest child, and so on down to the youngest member of the family. The remains would be placed, along with other food, on the rafters. On the third day chickens and perhaps more pigs would be killed and all the villagers summoned to a feast. On the fourth day everything would be cleared away and the family would again fast all day. On the fifth day life returned to its normal channels.

Ta Roe's wife, three years younger than he, had also been to school, first in Pyagawpu and then in Shwegyin. Their first-born, a girl, died at the age of two from dysentery. (There is a high rate of infant mortality amongst these hill Karens.) Their second child, a girl, they called Naw Yi Baw, and Ta Roe gave her also the English name of Caroline. When he was a young man he had been fond of singing 'Carolina Moon'. Their third child, also a girl, was born in June, 1942. Ta Roe's wife called the child Rosalind, for when she was a schoolgirl at Shwegyin she had read the tale of Orlando and Rosalind and it had made a lasting impression on her.



## CHAPTER 7

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Soon after Seagrim moved to Pyagawpu Father Calmon came up to see him. The regrettable truth is that some of the Karen levies in the south were behaving badly and, left entirely to their own devices, were using their weapons not to protect but to oppress the villagers. A levy commander near Kadaingti, was proving especially troublesome. Father Calmon came up to ask Seagrim to take some measures to bring these men under control. He was under the impression that Seagrim was still up round Mawchi and he was surprised to find him living at Pyagawpu. With regard to the trouble in the south Seagrim said he would call the levy commander up to see him and would also write to Willie Saw and other levy commanders in those parts.

Seagrim, in Father Calmon's opinion, was a very fine man—'all the Karens loved him'—but the priest thought that he was being unwise in living so openly. He urged Seagrim to be more careful, to live in a forest hide-out which was known only to two or three trusted men, and to travel, if he travelled at all, only at night. The Karens were children, he said, and, although they would never wish him harm, they had as little sense of security as children. In response to these warnings Seagrim said briefly: 'I trust the Karens.'

Father Calmon only spent one day with Seagrim. On returning to his mission near Papun he was very surprised to find a young Englishman waiting for him. The Englishman introduced himself, in perfect French, as Corporal Ras Pagani, of the Reconnaissance Regiment. He had escaped from working on the Burma-Siam railway about 200 miles

to the south, and he had been guided north nearly all the way by Karens.

Pagani must have been a remarkable man. With an Italian name, son of an English father and a French mother, he had been in the East Surrey Regiment as a private soldier before the war. He fought in France in 1940 and was one of the last to be evacuated from Dunkirk. In England he was in one of the first units formed after the evacuation. Later he went out to Malaya in the Reconnaissance battalion (formerly the 5th Loyals) of the 18th Division, that British division which landed, so tragically, in the very concluding stages of the campaign. From Singapore he escaped to Sumatra. He was picked up by the Japanese in Sumatra, and in the autumn of 1942 was sent up to work on the building of the Burma-Siam railway, that ghastly undertaking which was to claim so many thousands of British lives. There were several attempts at escape. Some of the escapers were recaptured by the Japanese and either executed or treated with barbarous severity. Some perished in the jungle. None escaped overland to tell the tale of horror to the world. It was only much later when a Japanese ship taking prisoners-of-war to Japan was sunk by an allied submarine and some of the survivors picked up that the details first became known. Ras Pagani very nearly succeeded in achieving what many others tried and failed to do. It was not for want of courage on his part, or lack of co-operation on the part of the Karens, that he was to fail. According to Father Calmon, he was 'not only a nice fellow but also a very brave man, always wanting to fight the Burmese and the Japanese'.

Father Calmon looked after him for a few days and then sent him north to Seagrim. The latter, we may be sure, must have been delighted to welcome him, a brave and resolute spirit akin to his own, and to talk in his own language again. He evidently trusted Pagani and soon used him on a special mission. There was still trouble with the levies in the south. Ah Din, one of the levy commanders, who disagreed with

Willie Saw and Father Calmon, had come up to see Seagrim. Seagrim, who undoubtedly felt that Ah Din was a brave fighting man, devoted to him personally, found himself in a dilemma and did not know what action to take. So he decided to send Pagani down to the Kadaingti area in the south to make a personal investigation of the situation there and to suggest recommendations. Pagani left with a couple of Karen guides and was away for several weeks.

Before dawn on the morning of February 25, 1943, at his village of Chawido, Ta Roe heard someone knocking on the door of his hut. It was a young Karen who had come up hot-foot from a village mid-way between Papun and Pyagawpu travelling all night, with a message from a friend of Ta Roe's that the Japanese were on their way north from Papun and were due to arrive in Pyagawpu that morning. Ta Roe's first thought was: 'I must save Seagrim.' He dressed hurriedly, went out, collected one of his elephants and went into Pyagawpu. He told Seagrim and the men with him that the Japanese were on their way. They hastily gathered their few belongings, put them on the elephant, and set off as quickly as they could for the original hiding-place a few miles east of Chawido, the one which Ta Roe had chosen when Seagrim had first come down from the north.

Seagrim left at 6.30. Half an hour later about seventy Japanese soldiers, under the command of a lieutenant, arrived in Pyagawpu. They called the villagers and asked, in the little English they had, 'Where English? Where English?' Ta Roe replied: 'No English.' They then went and installed themselves in the church while the Karens sat on the ground under the building. They had one Karen interpreter with them. Summoning Ta Roe and some other elders, the lieutenant asked, through the interpreter: 'Are there any British officers or soldiers hiding in these hills? We have been told that there are more than 2,000 of them and that aeroplanes from India are supplying them with arms.'

Ta Roe replied: 'There are no British officers or soldiers round here. If you do not believe me, you may search the village. If there were 2,000 men here, you would be sure to find traces of them in the village.'

The lieutenant ordered his men to search the village. After an hour they returned saying that they could find no trace of any British soldiers. Then the lieutenant said: 'Three of you elders must come down with us to Papun. We shall have our breakfast and start for Papun afterwards.'

The Karens were very frightened. It was the first time they had ever set eyes on the Japanese and they had heard many stories of their cruelty. It was decided that Ta Roe, the village schoolmaster and another elder should go. They asked the other villagers to pray for them while they were away. Ta Roe was able to whisper to one elder whom he trusted that Seagrim was now back in his old hut in the forest east of Chawido. But it was not safe for him to stay there. He must be moved as soon as possible to another place. Ta Roe suggested somewhere in the mountains to the north-west of Pyagawpu. The elder said that he would set about moving Seagrim as soon as the Japanese left Pyagawpu.

Ta Roe and his two companions were badly scared and on the way down they wondered what would happen to them. At Papun there were only two houses still standing. They went to one on the east bank of the Yunzalin, which had belonged to the murdered Indian merchant Ram Singh. Here they were taken before another Japanese officer. Also present was the new Burmese Deputy Commissioner of Papun, U Maung Shwe,<sup>1</sup> who had come up with the Japanese two days before. The Karens expected that they would be cross-examined at great length, but only three questions were put to them.

Firstly: 'Who was responsible for burning Papun town and all the surrounding villages?'

They replied: 'The B.I.A.'

<sup>1</sup> This is not his real name.

Secondly: 'Are there any British soldiers round Pyagawpu?'

They replied: 'No.'

Thirdly: 'From now on do you promise to co-operate with us in every respect?'

They said 'Yes' and Ta Roe added that if there was any trouble round Pyagawpu they might hold him personally responsible.

The Japanese officer then gave them a short lecture. He said that Maung Shwe was to be the new D.C. in Salween District. There was now a new administration in Burma headed by Dr. Ba Maw. The Karens in Salween District were to co-operate with Maung Shwe and the new administration. After that he signified that the meeting was at an end and that they were free to return to their homes.

On returning to Pyagawpu Ta Roe found that his friend had moved Seagrim to a small place in the forest near a village called Payasedo, about twenty-three miles west of Pyagawpu. For the next few months Seagrim stayed there. Shortly after he arrived he wrote to Ta Roe asking for some supplies. Ta Roe loaded up one of his elephants and took a supply of rice and other foodstuffs to him. Thereafter he wrote to Ta Roe about once a month and when he needed more food Ta Roe would either take it himself or send a trusted friend with it. Seagrim's letters always contained words of encouragement. 'Don't be discouraged, Ta Roe, don't worry. Surely one day the British will come back to us. In the meantime we must put our trust in God and have faith in Him.'

When the Japanese arrived in Pyagawpu, Ras Pagani had already left Kadaingti and was on his way up from the south. He must have been shortly behind the column of Japanese soldiers which accompanied the new D.C., for one night he led a small party of levies in an attack on some Japanese sentries. There was much firing, but they could not see in the

darkness what they achieved. All the Karens say that Pagani was brave to the point of recklessness.

When he returned to Pyagawpu, Pagani heard about the visit of the Japanese. But there was no one who could tell him where Seagrim had gone to. Instead of waiting patiently for a few days, in which case he would have been sure to re-establish contact with Seagrim, Pagani decided to implement a plan which had been in his mind ever since he escaped from the railway. It was a plan from which Seagrim had already tried to dissuade him, pointing out that it had only the slenderest prospect of success, whereas his chance of surviving the war would be considerably greater if he remained with the Karens. Pagani, in a word, decided to try and get clear across Burma to the British lines in the Arakan. It was a gallant conception. If it had succeeded it would have been one of the great escape stories of the war.

He went north in the direction of the Mawchi road taking with him four Gurkhas who had been cut off from their battalions the previous year and some Karen guides. He was passed from village to village, travelling always at night, the elders arranging guides. To an old elephant driver called Saw Ji Bu, who had once acted as guide to Seagrim and Ba Thein, he gave a certificate, scrawled in pencil on a piece of paper, saying that Ji Bu had greatly assisted him 'to try to contact the allied forces' by feeding his party and arranging guides. Pagani got down into the plains, and was passed from Karen village to Karen village right across the Pegu Yomas, the hills of central Burma.

Amongst the Karens it is universally believed that he was ambushed by the Japanese and killed near Allanmyo on the Irrawaddy. But, although wounded, he was not killed, and, by successfully posing as an American airman, he avoided the death which would certainly have been meted out to him if the Japanese had learned that he had escaped from the railway. He spent the rest of the war in gaol in Rangoon and was repatriated to England after Japan's surrender.

Pagani's capture was a sad ending to a brave enterprise. He was almost within sight of his goal. Across the Irrawaddy he could see the Arakan Yomas, the mountain ranges of western Burma. Once into that country, he would have had little difficulty in reaching the British lines.<sup>1</sup>

The reader has probably wondered what lay behind the sudden and unexpected arrival of the Japanese in Pyagawpu on February 24.

In Burma the rule of the Thakins had been forcibly ended by the Japanese and a new Burmese administration, headed by Dr. Ba Maw, had come into being. Towards the end of 1942 Maung Shwe, who had been in one of the government services under the British, was posted to Papun as Deputy Commissioner and District Superintendent of Police, with his brother-in-law as Headquarters Assistant, the next senior post in the district. Maung Shwe, with some reason, was afraid to come up into this Karen country without a strong body of Japanese troops, and it appears that one of the means whereby he tried to persuade the Japanese to make this body as large as possible was by telling them that there were numbers of British guerrillas in the district. After many delays he left Bilin on February 20 with 700 Japanese troops and a body of Burmese and Karen police from the south. Rumours of the presence of some Europeans in the district had probably already reached the *Kempeitai* headquarters in Thaton. (The *Kempeitai* were the notorious Japanese military police, equivalent of the Gestapo.)

One of the first things the Japanese did on arriving in Papun was to send a detachment up to Pyagawpu as already related. A few days later they burned down Father Calmon's mission outside Papun, the priest receiving timely warning and escaping into the forest.

Maung Shwe does not seem to have made a very good

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 2, page 202

beginning to his administration. He seized all the salt and *nga-pi* (Burmese fish-paste) in Papun, saying that, being imports, they could only be sold under licence—and then sold them himself, at a handsome profit. He did the same thing with local produce like paddy (unhusked rice) and jaggery (an unrefined sugar). He allowed his police to seize cloth and anything else they wanted, the police usually justifying their action by saying that the articles in question had been looted by their present owners. The Karens might possibly have been prepared to tolerate abuses such as these, but what annoyed them considerably was the action which Maung Shwe took against local Karen leaders like Darlington and against Father Calmon. He arrested Darlington and some other Karens, on grounds of non-co-operation in getting back arms, and sent them down to Japanese police headquarters in Thaton. He put a price of 500 rupees on Father Calmon's head and, when this failed to bring any results, he started to arrest several Catholic Karen families and cast thirty Indian Catholics into gaol. Rather than see his people suffer, Father Calmon walked into Papun and presented himself before Maung Shwe. 'You say that I have arms,' said this gallant Frenchman. 'These are all the arms I have.' And he placed his walking-stick and his rosary on the table. He then proceeded to tell Maung Shwe just exactly what he thought of the B.I.A. and their treatment of the Karens. He was convinced that he would be shot, so he did not care what he said. Maung Shwe did not shoot him, but sent him down to the *Kempeitai* headquarters in Thaton. Here, for a time, Father Calmon was looked after by a kindly Burmese Deputy Commissioner and by two very decent Burmese gaolers, and during his detention he wrote a long report on the whole Karen problem. The main argument of the report was that there would be constant trouble in the hills until the Karens were given their own Karen officials. He recommended the appointment of a Karen D.C. and D.S.P., a Karen Township Officer and the establishment of an advisory council on which all the minorities, Indians,



Shans and Burmese, should be represented. This report, by a series of steps which it is not necessary to detail, found its way to Dr. Ba Maw.

Dr. Ba Maw had already sent a Karen mission to Salween District, composed of two prominent Karens from Rangoon and one from the Delta. (The latter was the famous Shwe Tun Gya, the 'Tiger of the Delta', of whom more will be heard later.) The mission went to Kadaingti, where its members met Ah Din, and then to Papun. The following are some extracts from its report as originally submitted, in English, to Dr. Ba Maw.

*To appreciate the real trouble in Papun District, one has to go back with regret to those so-called B.I.A. days. The B.I.A. burned many Karen villages, resulting in many homeless. They took their properties, gold and silver, even daily utensils. They murdered many Karens including seventeen leading citizens and elders. Lastly, and most important of all, they took away many of the Karen women-folk, and twenty young girls were taken to Papun and kept as prostitutes in line for the B.I.A. soldiers. The B.I.A. were then in charge of one Bob Tun Hla and he is said to be solely responsible for all these happenings.*

*With the wounds still fresh in their minds, homeless and poverty-stricken, came the present administration with Maung Shwe as chief administrator. The first time Maung Shwe ever set foot on Papun soil was with the Nippon Army. The Karen people were already demoralised, and on seeing them they all dispersed into the jungles leaving behind everything they possessed. Maung Shwe and his party made mistake by taking some of their properties alleging that they could not have been their properties and they also burned some houses.*

*Then came the love-making episode. Maung Shwe managed to get all the Karen and Burmese elders together and formed a Peace Preservation Committee. The Karens expected that things would begin to start normally. Then followed a demand*

*for the surrender of arms and the Karens began to surrender their arms. Meanwhile Maung Sbwe arrested Father Calmon saying that he had been orally commanded by the Japanese to arrest and kill all Englishmen, and sent him to the Japanese Military Police at Thaton. . . .*

*Then Maung Sbwe called a public meeting at Kadaingti, south of Papun. Many went including two men from Ab Din's group, but these two men were killed by Maung Sbwe's party. Then the people became desperate and there were open clashes between the Karens and Maung Sbwe's party.*

*A few days afterwards Maung Sbwe sent his men with five Nippon soldiers and they ransacked all the houses of Karens and they ill-treated seven severely, one dying the following day, and they arrested eleven elders and took them to Papun police station. The effect was that innocent men, women and children had to go into the jungle, exposed to heat and cold, without sufficient food and clothing. Many got ill and some died. And the cattle also developed disease, and died, and according to some about seventy-five per cent have already died. Some men thought of revenge on Maung Sbwe. It was at this point that the mission got in touch with them. . . .*

*One thing the people insist on is to give them new officials who can understand and appreciate their difficulties and help them instead of putting fear into them.*

The mission recommended the release of Father Calmon and other Karens still under arrest, and the appointment of Karen officials.

By a curious chance I have also come across some of the reports which Maung Shwe sent to his superiors when he was at Papun. They were written in English, as was nearly all official correspondence during the three years of Dr. Ba Maw's administration. Early in March he was writing to Kempeitai headquarters in Thaton:

*It has been the mentality of the Karen community as a whole and particularly those of Papun to wish and expect the return*

*of the British. This has been strengthened by the presence of a European captain and a Roman Catholic priest in the district who are continuously spoiling the minds of the people against both the Japanese and Burmese governments.*

Later in March he visited Pyagawpu and reported to the Secretary for Home Affairs, Rangoon:

*The initial motives of this tour were to promote peace measures, to study the topography of the district, and to get general information about the people, their aspirations, what arms they have, and, last but not least, to investigate the whereabouts of Seagrim, Father Calmon, Ras Pagani and their troops.*

A little later:

*I have so far been waging a diplomatic war with the non-sympathisers of the present government and Nippon leadership and am devoting all my energies to wiping out the pro-British mentality of the people here. Outwardly I am not bothering about the presence of a few Europeans in this district and I am making it appear that I am not caring for them at all, but I have been working up the minds of the people not to regard them as friends but as their real enemies. Once my foothold is established in the district, it will be an easy task to run them down.*

In a melancholy postscript he adds:

*The only arms which the Karens have surrendered so far are either rickety or unserviceable.*

But Maung Shwe's foothold was never to be established. In July, mainly as a result of the two reports, one from Father Calmon, the other from the Karen mission, he was recalled to Rangoon, and two Karen members of the Burma Police, Saw Tommer and Arthur Ta Bi, were appointed respectively D.C. and D.S.P., Salween District, and Township

Officer, Papun. With these appointments there was an immediate change for the better and the Karens began to think that things were at last returning to normal.

Seagrim, during that summer of 1943, was to have two more interesting visitors at Payasedo. The first was a Karen called Saw Po Hla, a tall, lanky young man, with a gentle expression, who spoke excellent English. His home was near Myaungmya in the Delta, his father being a prosperous land-owner. After graduating in 1939 from Rangoon University where he took honours in religion and philosophy, he joined the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company and was the first non-European to be appointed to the post of provincial assistant. In January, 1941, he enlisted in the 11th battalion Burma Rifles and received his commission shortly afterwards. He became quartermaster of the battalion and remained with it through the Burma campaign until it was finally disbanded in 1942 at Indaw in Upper Burma. The Japanese occupied Indaw on May 23 and immediately started a witch-hunt for the soldiers of the Burma Rifles who had been fighting with the British. Po Hla escaped capture and made his way to Mandalay in a sampan. Here he went sick for two months. In August he went to Rangoon, and in September he reached his home near Myaungmya. Within one month he was informed against, and the Japanese, learning that he was an ex-officer of the Burma Rifles, came to arrest him. He escaped to Rangoon and then went up to Pegu where he lay low for four months. But once again the *Kempeitai* got on his trail (there is no doubt their intelligence service was extraordinarily efficient) and Po Hla fled first to Shwegyin and then to Kyaukkyi. At Kyaukkyi, through the local levy section commander, he conveyed a message to Seagrim. The latter sent down two Karens who escorted him to the camp at Payasedo.

Po Hla was an intelligent and well-educated Karen, and

there were many things he could do which were beyond the capacity of the hill Karens, who, however good-hearted and devoted to Seagrim, were nevertheless ignorant and naïve people. Seagrim was unable to move about much and he first used Po Hla as a sort of liaison officer with his section commanders. Po Hla travelled about the hills, carrying messages of encouragement from Seagrim to the levies, trying to smooth out their petty rivalries, reporting to Seagrim on their difficulties. Then rumours reached the hills that the Japanese were planning to establish *Kempeitai* posts at both Kyaukkyi and Papun. Seagrim sent Po Hla to try and find out what truth there was in these rumours, for if they were true he might have to shift his headquarters much further to the north. Po Hla went down to the plains, visited Pegu, Daiku and Nyaunglebin (towns on the main Rangoon-Mandalay road where the Japanese had *Kempeitai* posts), moved cautiously about and made enquiries, and learned that for the time being the Japanese had no apparent intention of moving either to Kyaukkyi or Papun. He returned to the hills and reported this reassuring news to Seagrim. On his next mission Seagrim sent him down to Papun. Saw Tommer had arrived to take Maung Shwe's place as D.C. and D.S.P. and Arthur Ta Bi was installed as Township Officer. Seagrim wanted to convey a secret message to both these men to tell them how pleased he was personally that Karen officials had at last been appointed to Salween District and to assure them that they could count on the full backing of the levies in maintaining peace and order. After delivering the message Po Hla made a tour of the levy section headquarters in the south and told them that, on Seagrim's orders, they were to give every support to Saw Tommer and Arthur Ta Bi. He then returned to Payasedo.

Seagrim and Po Hla became close friends. There is no doubt that Seagrim found it refreshing to have an educated Karen to talk to, one moreover who had studied his own two favourite subjects, religion and philosophy, at the university.

The first time they met they spent nearly the whole night talking. 'You're a Baptist,' said Seagrim; 'I'm Church of England. I want to know how the Baptists interpret some of these passages in the Bible.' Seagrim, says Po Hla, was a great believer in the power of prayer, and his main preoccupation at that time was with the problem of suffering, the significance, especially for Christians, of the Cross. One night they got on to the subject of miracles. Seagrim asked Po Hla if he believed in them. The latter replied that he believed in them although he could not explain them. Seagrim said that in the past he had always discounted them but now he had come to believe in them. He told Po Hla of an incident which had happened up at Mawtudo the previous August, in the middle of the rainy season. One day they ran right out of food. One of the Kachins said to him: 'Thakin (master), there are no more rations. What are we going to do?' Seagrim said: 'Don't worry. When the time comes God will send us some rations.' And he told the young Kachin, in Burmese, the story of Elijah and the ravens. That morning, after drinking some hot water for breakfast, they all prayed together. Later in the day a curious thing happened. Further down the valley some Karen hunting dogs which were routing about in the forest on their own put up a barking-deer and started to chase it. Instead of running away from the village into a denser part of the forest, as a deer would do ninety-nine times out of a hundred, this deer ran right into the village. The Karens, who had heard the excited barking of the dogs, came out of their huts and one of them killed the deer with a spear. They immediately thought of Seagrim and, knowing he was short of food, took the barking-deer, which in the hills is regarded as a great delicacy, up to his hut, along with some vegetables. They skinned it and cooked it for him and, although he asked them to take some, refused to take any for themselves. Seagrim told Po Hla that before the war he would have regarded this as a mere coincidence. He now considered that it had been a direct answer to their prayers.

When Po Hla went down into the plains, Seagrim asked him to try and obtain a copy of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. This Po Hla was unable to do, but he brought back a biography of the American missionary, Dr. Adoniram Judson, which impressed him profoundly. Seagrim, says Po Hla, was quite determined to become a missionary after the war. He urged Po Hla to read Emerson's *Essays* and he often quoted a dictum of Emerson's that 'to think is to act'.

Seagrim one day was complaining about a Karen pastor who, to eke out a living, did a little trading in opium. 'Po Hla, I can't understand a Christian pastor who carries on a trade like that.' Po Hla said: 'These people are simple uneducated folk. This Karen does not realise that he is doing wrong. He has been told that stealing and adultery and drinking are wrong. He won't do those things. It is for you and me to teach this Karen and others like him that to trade in opium is wrong.' To which Seagrim replied: 'You are quite right, Po Hla. I misjudged that fellow.' On another occasion some Karens had been to Seagrim with some disputes which had seemed to him absurdly petty. He listened patiently to them and gave his advice, but after they had gone he said to Po Hla: 'Next time I'm going to tell these Karens what I really think about these petty squabbles of theirs.' Po Hla reminded Seagrim: 'These hill Karens are children. If you were not here they would take these disputes to the elders and the elders would settle them. But they regard you as their father and that is why they bring them to you. Would you blame your children if they quarrelled among themselves?' And Seagrim had to admit that he had been over-hasty.

The Karens, according to Po Hla, 'not only loved and trusted him, they almost worshipped him'. The older Karens used to call him *Pu Day Wa* or 'young white brother', a reference to the legend of the Golden Book, but amongst most of them, because of his great height, he was known as *Hpu Taw Kaw*, 'Grandfather Longlegs'. This was the name by which he commonly went in the hills.

If, when the villagers brought him food, one of his boys was absent, he would not dream of touching the food till the boy returned. 'Whatever he had, it had to be shared with his boys and with any guests who came to his camp.' If his boys had left the camp on some errand, he would cook the rice himself and have it waiting for them when they returned. He ate all the things which the hill Karens ate, bamboo shoots, *nga pi*, buffalo meat, even rats and frogs and snakes. The villagers used to say: 'He has even learned to live like us.' When his army boots wore out, they made him leather sandals, but he refused to wear them and always insisted on going bare-foot, to show that he was as tough as any hill Karen. What surprised them greatly was that an army officer should be such a mild drinker. He drank rarely and then only to please them.

Such are some of the recollections of Saw Po Hla who was one of the two interesting visitors who came to see Seagrim at Payasedo that summer of 1943. The other was a certain Lieutenant Ba Gyaw, who arrived by parachute from India.



## CHAPTER 8

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We must now leave the Karen hills for a space and cross many hundreds of miles to the west to consider what had been happening in India.

The tide of Japanese advance came to an end, fortunately, because, if the Japanese had tried to land in eastern India or Ceylon in the summer of 1942, there was little that we could have done to stop them. But disaster, provided you are not overwhelmed by it, is a great spur, and it has always been a spur to the British. For a few months that summer there was a lull in the war in Asia while the Japanese lay back and gloated over their rich prizes, won with such unexpected ease, and the allies worked feverishly at building up and regrouping their forces. Later that year British and Indian forces were able to take the offensive in a campaign in the Arakan. It was not a large-scale operation and it did not achieve its very limited objective. But it signified that we had rounded the corner. What was true of the British forces in India at that period, soon to be numbered in their millions, was also true of the department concerned with special operations, numerically small but with a great potential significance. Oriental Mission had never had time to get going properly in Burma. But its officers, and the handful of men who had been seconded to them, nearly all succeeded in reaching India, most of them taking the long overland route into Assam. As soon as they recovered from the rigours of that journey they set about building up the organisation anew and planning new operations.

No one in India in 1942 knew whether Seagrim was still alive or not. But it was known that he had decided to stay

behind in the Karen hills if he could, and it was thought that there, if anywhere in Burma, a British officer could evade capture by the Japanese. No doubts were felt about the continued loyalty of the Karens. Because of this loyalty the Karen hills were regarded as an obvious field for special operations. Moreover, from the point of view of geography they provided a good base for operations against the main Japanese north-south line of communication from Rangoon to Mandalay, against their east-west line of communication from Rangoon to Moulmein and Bangkok, and also for operations into Siam.

Late in 1942 a plan was submitted to, and approved by, general headquarters in Delhi. It was in four stages. First of all a Karen officer, Second Lieutenant Ba Gyaw, was to drop with three other Karen parachutists, very lightly equipped and *without* a wireless-transmitter, into the Karen hills. Ba Gyaw was an old Burma Rifleman who had come out of Burma as a subadar. He was a quiet, simple man, and every confidence was felt in him. On landing Ba Gyaw was to make a quick preliminary reconnaissance and decide whether it was safe for a transmitter and the rest of their kit to be dropped.

A few nights later (stage 2) a Hudson was to fly over the same dropping zone and, if certain prearranged signals were seen from the ground, the transmitter and kit were to be dropped. Communication could then be established with India and Ba Gyaw was to make a wider survey and inform India whether it was safe to drop a British officer, Major Nimmo, with a team of Karen wireless operators. This was stage 3. If Nimmo landed successfully and considered it safe for another British officer to join him, Captain McCrindle was to jump in (stage 4) with more transmitters and wireless operators. Ba Gyaw was instructed to try to contact Seagrim as soon as he landed or inform India what had happened to him. But it was assumed in India that Seagrim was still alive and the plan envisaged the operation in the Karen hills taking the following form. Nimmo would make his headquarters north of the Mawchi road, McCrindle would work in the

south round Kadaingti; Seagrim, who would be in over-all command, would remain in the centre. All three would be in wireless communication not only with India but with each other. Amongst the objectives of the operation were the building up of intelligence networks to transmit intelligence to India, sabotage of Japanese lines of communication, subversive propaganda, and political warfare directed towards an eventual rising of the Karens against the Japanese.

Such was the plan. Like most plans in warfare, it did not work out quite as its framers intended.

Jimmy Nimmo and Eric McCrindle, the two young Scots who had major roles in this plan, had long been close friends. Both were in the Scottish timber firm of Magregor and Co. whose forest leases extend from the Pegu Yomas eastwards across the Sittang into the Karen hills. Both, during the course of their work before the war, had come to know the Karens and the Karen country. They were obvious choices for work amongst the Karens and they had been amongst the first officers in Burma to be recruited by Stevenson for the Burma Levies. In addition to their knowledge of the people and the country, both were physically tough and courageous men.

Nimmo came of a family of lawyers long settled at Falkirk. Born in 1912, he was educated at Fettes (which his father had entered the day the school was opened) and Trinity College, Cambridge. There were five brothers and two sisters. As a family they have had almost as distinguished a military record as the Seagrim brothers. They represent, perhaps, *civilian* Britain at its wartime best, as the Seagrim brothers do *military* Britain, amateur and professional, non-regular and regular, on whose perfect integration in modern war hangs victory or defeat. The eldest brother settled in New Zealand. The second, George, entered the family law firm, and later lost his life serving in Burma with the 2nd battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers. He was awarded the M.C. for rescuing wounded under fire. Patrick Nimmo, a regular officer in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, was killed at Sidi Barrani

in December, 1940. Bill Nimmo, who was at Cambridge when the war started, held a territorial commission in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, volunteered for the Commandos and went out to India in 1942. He took part in both the Wingate expeditions and was awarded the M.C. (Later he, too, was to parachute into the Karen hills.) Of the two sisters the elder was married to a regular soldier, Colonel H. M. Cadell, R.E., O.B.E. The other, Miss Helen Nimmo, rose to the rank of Chief Commander in the A.T.S. and in 1946 was awarded the O.B.E. for her services. It is a good record for one family.

Eric McCrindle was an only son. Shortly after he was born, in 1912 in Surrey, his family moved to Scotland where his father became Head Office Manager of the Union Bank of Scotland in Glasgow. The family settled at Helensburgh on the Clyde and this was Eric McCrindle's home until he left for Burma. He went to school at Sedbergh in Yorkshire and, before going up to Pembroke College, Cambridge, attended a school in Switzerland and travelled in Spain with a tutor. When he was about to take his degree, his father died suddenly and he felt that he had to start earning his living at once. He was fond of sport and outdoor life and dreaded the idea of an office routine. Thinking that work with a timber firm in Burma might give him the sort of life he wanted, he applied successfully to Magregors and came out to Burma about the same time as Nimmo. He never regretted his decision and was very happy in Burma.

According to men who knew them both, Nimmo was a quiet solid person, very determined, fond of his golf and his dogs, not perhaps a fluent talker but very good company. The chief things they remember about McCrindle are a charming smile and a love of argument. He could concentrate with extraordinary single-mindedness on subjects which interested him, such as certain courses which he had to take in India as part of the training for special operations.

The warm friendship which existed between Nimmo and

McCrindle went back to 1934 when they first came out to Burma. Both of them, together again in India in 1942, volunteered with enthusiasm for this hazardous operation in the Karen hills. Many Karens, too, who had come out of Burma with the British forces were also volunteering for special operations. Every effort, it should be strongly emphasised, was made by the British officers recruiting the Karens to impress on them the extreme risks of the work, so that they should not enter upon it without their eyes being wide open. As grim a picture as possible was painted of the risks involved and the slim chances of survival, but there was never any shortage of volunteers, Karen or British.

The first stage of the plan for the Karen hills went off successfully. Ba Gyaw and his three Karen companions were dropped on the night of February 18. It was an extremely difficult dropping zone for the pilot, Flying-Officer James King (later Squadron-Leader King, D.S.O., D.F.C.). He had to fly into a very narrow valley with hills on either side 1,000 to 1,500 feet above his flying level, do a sharp right-angle turn about two miles in, then three-quarters of a mile to the dropping zone (still in the valley) and immediately zoom up over a hill of some 3,000 feet at the head of it. But the weather over the dropping zone was good and the moon was full. To cover the drop a carefully synchronised raid by five Liberators was made on Toungoo. Few readers of the *Calcutta Statesman* of February 20, on whose front page a joint India Command communiqué, in the formal language of all communiqués, announced 'a damaging attack on a Japanese airfield at Toungoo' in which 'bombs were seen to burst in the target area' and 'two enemy night fighters were damaged and driven off', can have imagined that the true purpose of this raid was to cover the dropping of British agents in the Karen hills. So often, behind seemingly straightforward items of news, a deeper meaning lies concealed.

The subsequent attempt to drop the transmitter and their kit to Ba Gyaw's party can best be told in the words of

Flying-Officer King's log, a little masterpiece of understatement.

*Feb. 25. Conf. with SASO 221 Group. Cover raid fixed.*

*Took off on op. Vis 1-2 m. Thick haze up to 700 ft. Port engine cut on take-off. Picked up, landed, tested, took off again. Cloud on bills. Failed locate d.z.*

*Feb. 26. Made another attempt on op. Vis 1-2 m. Found valley OK but visibility so bad couldn't distinguish signals from ground. Saw bonfires but no torches. Did not drop containers. Duration flight 8 hrs. 10 mins.*

*Feb. 27 and 28. Met. forecasts prevented any attempts.*

*March 1. Took off on op. Weather same as previous nights. Reached Irrawaddy. Oil pump in auxiliary oil supply failed after pumping one gallon only into starboard engine. No alternative but to turn back. Bengal completely obscured by thick ground mist. Could not get D/F assistance from Dum Dum. Starboard engine oil pressure dropped, so cut engine and proceeded to coast. Found clear patch and force-landed in stubble field, 15 m. northwest of entrance to Hoogli. Transferred oil from auxiliary tank to starboard engine and took off again when weather sufficiently clear. 30 mins. to Dum Dum. Duration of trip 8 hrs. 10 mins.*

*No damage to aircraft, life or property.*

How Jimmy King managed to put his Hudson down on to these Bengal rice-fields and take it off again remains a mystery. But, as everyone said, he had 'the luck of the devil'. He was a tough little red-headed Scot from Paisley, reckless perhaps but a superb pilot. He took part in most of these early drops. One of the senior staff officers in India on whom rested the tremendous responsibility of deciding when and where and how men were to go into enemy territory, says of him: 'All you had to say to him was "It's a fair bet, Jimmy"', and he'd never ask any questions or make any fuss.' He was later awarded the D.S.O. for flying an unarmed Hudson in daylight across Burma, after a squadron medical officer, who had never

parachuted before (also awarded the D.S.O.), jumped in to try and succour the crew of a Hudson which had crashed on the northern Burma-Siam frontier.

After these three failures in February, any further attempts had to be postponed till the next full moon. In the interval news reached India strongly suggesting that Seagrim was still alive and up in the Karen hills.

This information was obtained in a curious way. A party of men from Wingate's first expedition, who had tried to reach the Irrawaddy and had been forced to turn back towards the Chindwin, came across some panniers which the owners, seeing soldiers approaching, had thrown down by the wayside and abandoned. The party included several Karens and one of them found a page of Karen writing in one of the panniers. The Karens shouted and the owners of the panniers, who were also Karens, came out of hiding. From these Karens the party learned that there was a Karen elephant camp in the neighbourhood. They went to the camp and suggested to the elephant drivers (who were all Karens) that they accompany them back to the British lines, bringing their elephants. The drivers were agreeable, and they all set off to the west. When they reached the Chindwin, which at that time formed a rough boundary between British and Japanese-held territory, the elephants were very tired and it was decided that the men should cross over that night and that they should come back and fetch the elephants in the morning. The men got across all right, but when they tried to return the next day they were shot at by some Japanese on the east bank and had to return. Amongst these elephant-drivers (several of whom later took part in the operations in the Karen hills) was one Saw Na Mu who had been up to Pyagawpu the previous November. He had not met Seagrim, but he had a convincing circumstantial story of the continued presence in those parts of two Europeans, one a British officer, the other a missionary.

Efforts were now redoubled to drop the transmitter to Ba Gyaw and establish contact with Seagrim. But the difficulties

were formidable. Firstly, drops could only be attempted when there was a full moon, owing to the difficulty of navigating at night in the hills. Secondly, after midnight a thick mist developed in the valleys, completely obscuring the ground, so drops could only be attempted during the first part of the full moon. Thirdly, the Hudsons, which, although unsuitable for such work, were then the only planes available, were ancient battered machines continually developing mechanical trouble. It probably sounds fantastic to the reader, but every full moon from February to October, 1943 (except July, the worst month of the monsoon), attempts were made, all unsuccessful, to drop that wireless set to Ba Gyaw. Each full moon about three attempts were made. Sometimes it was engine trouble that was responsible for the failure. (Once it was found that a bee had got jammed in the airspeed indicator.) Sometimes it was ground mist over the target. Sometimes it was poor visibility, due to the monsoon, over the whole of Bengal and Burma. It must have been irritating for Ba Gyaw and his men, who kept the rendezvous faithfully each full moon, to hear the Hudson overhead and not be able to see it. Being Karens, they probably took it more philosophically than British officers would have done.

King was usually the pilot and he was nearly always accompanied by Nimmo. (It was partly for the tenacity which he displayed in going out on all these sorties that Nimmo was later awarded the D.S.O.) Nearly twenty unsuccessful attempts must have been made to accomplish stage 2 of the plan for the Karen hills. Everyone was depressed at the continued failure. Nimmo, especially, was becoming extremely impatient. Finally he submitted a memorandum containing some suggestions of his own. He suggested that he should go in with five Karens during the September full moon and that they should be dropped on the flat country south of Kyaukkyi, thus reducing the navigational problem of the pilot, although increasing the risk to himself and his party. They would take no kit except what they had



when they dropped. As soon as they landed they would make for the hills as fast as they could. Up in the hills they would prepare two alternative dropping zones and Nimmo would see to it that all the signalling arrangements were properly organised. The following month, October, was probably the best month in the year for dropping in the hills. The rains draw to a close in October and the mists caused by the cold weather in the valleys have not yet begun. If this new course of action were followed, concluded Nimmo, there should be every reasonable assurance of dropping a transmitter successfully in October and establishing communication between India and the Karen hills.

Nimmo's plan was approved, but bad luck still dogged them. A malevolent Fate seemed to have set its face against the success of the enterprise. Twice during the September moon he set out with five Karens; each time the aeroplane was forced back by bad weather. They tried again during the October moon, and this time they were successful. They jumped, *with* their wireless equipment, on the night of October 12, landing on the same difficult dropping zone which had been used by Ba Gyaw.

In less than two days they found both Seagrim and Ba Gyaw. On October 15, 1943, they established wireless communication with India.

## CHAPTER 9

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We can well imagine how glad Seagrim must have been to welcome Nimmo, to hear all the news from India and to discuss plans for the future. One of the first things they did, however, was to send one of Seagrim's most trusted followers, Saw Digay, down into the plains to try and find out whether the Japanese had got wind of the dropping of Nimmo and his companions. Digay went to Kyaukkyi and then to Nyaunglebin, on the Rangoon-Mandalay road. He made enquiries and came to the conclusion that the Japanese *suspected* the dropping of parachutists, for they had heard planes overhead at night, but that they knew nothing definite and showed no signs of taking any action. He returned to the hills and reported to Seagrim and Nimmo. Although reassured, they decided it would be wiser to move their headquarters to a remoter part of the hills further to the north.

The Karen parachutist who henceforth acted as Seagrim's wireless operator was called Thet Wa, nineteen years old, a quiet and reserved young man, speaking good English. Born in Bassein, he had been educated at the Sgaw Karen High School there and had later entered the Rangoon Technical Institute. The pupils of the Institute were evacuated to India at the beginning of 1942 and in September, 1942, Thet Wa enlisted in the R.A.F. The following January he volunteered for special operations and did his parachute and other training.

According to Thet Wa, life in the forest was hard. The rains were not yet over and there were swarms of mosquitoes. They had no mosquito-nets, only one blanket apiece, and they could not protect themselves from the insects. Leeches would fasten themselves to legs and arms and have to be burned off, or, if they had enough salt, a touch would make them

relinquish their hold. Unable to get cigarettes, Thet Wa made himself a Karen pipe of bamboo and smoked the dried tobacco leaf given him by the villagers.

Seagrim was thin but in good health and excellent spirits. He always wore Karen dress. In addition to the Bible and Shakespeare, he had succeeded in obtaining copies of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, a book called *Faith*, Tagore's *Gitanji*, and some ancient copies of *The Reader's Digest*. Most of these books had been smuggled up to him from the school library in Kyaukkyi. He told Thet Wa that when he first left England for the East his mother told him to read the Bible every day. He had never bothered to do so until he came up into the hills. He realised now that his mother had been right. Every evening there were prayers round the fire, a reading from the Bible, a hymn in Karen sung by the boys, and usually a short exposition by Seagrim. Thet Wa remembers one evening when he talked about Christ and His sufferings, how it was only through suffering that man could find God. Several times he talked to Thet Wa of his intention to become a missionary. Of his army pay which had accumulated during the time he was in the hills, he said he proposed to give half to his mother, half to the Karens.

Seagrim was always cheerful. He used to be very amused by the rumours which the hill Karens brought him. In all seriousness the credulous villagers told him that the Japanese had a battalion of monkeys which they had trained to throw hand grenades. They had seen British planes which carried smaller planes under their bodies. The smaller planes would detach themselves, do some bombing or strafing, and then return to the parent planes. (Auxiliary petrol tanks must have given rise to this story.) After Doolittle's raid on Tokyo the report began to circulate in the hills that 4,000 American planes had bombed Tokyo.

The days were now much fuller than they had been before. Karens came in with reports of various kinds. Levy section

commanders reported from time to time. Villagers who knew Seagrim well dropped in for talks. In the evenings they listened to the news from Delhi or London. Thet Wa was especially busy, for he and the others had to spend six hours a day turning the handles of the dynamo and charging the batteries. Sometimes it was raining at the time of transmitting to India and then four Karens would hold an old ground-sheet over Thet Wa as he tapped out the message.

Shortly after Nimmo arrived, Ta Roe, who was working hard bringing in his harvest, received a letter from Seagrim. 'Ta Roe, please come down to me at Pakawkhi village. We have good news.' Ta Roe went down and at Seagrim's camp he saw another white man, in khaki uniform, and some Karen soldiers with him. Seagrim introduced Ta Roe to the white man and told him that it was Major Nimmo who had come from India with a wireless set and some Karen soldiers. 'This is Ta Roe,' he said to Nimmo, 'who is always helping me.'

About two weeks later Ba Gyaw came to Ta Roe and said that he wanted to go up to Mawchi mines. The two of them went together. They found out how many Japanese there were at Mawchi and where they lived. They also discovered that the Japanese were building a motor road eastwards into Siam. They met many old Karen soldiers of the Burma Rifles who all said that they were keen to help the British as soon as they returned. They came back to Pakawkhi and gave all this information to Seagrim who sent it to India.

Whenever Arthur Ta Bi, the new Township Officer in Papun, heard any interesting news he sent it secretly to Seagrim. In October he learned from a Chinaman who had just come from Siam that the Japanese had built a big new airfield at Chiangmai. He obtained its exact location and the disposition of the planes and installations and sent them to Seagrim. (Some weeks later he learned that there had been a big allied raid on this airfield.) He also reported the location of a big Japanese workshop on the Burma-Siam railway and some petrol dumps on the Toungoo-Thandaung road. Whenever

he received any interesting documents from the government in Rangoon, he copied extracts and sent them to Seagrim. A Karen education officer at Papun sent information when the western section of the Burma-Siam railway was first open to light traffic, details of some Japanese troop movements, and a map of a big Japanese ammunition dump west of the lake at Toungoo.

Seagrim's chief Karen helper, Saw Po Hla, was not in the hills when Nimmo arrived. Many weeks previously Seagrim had learned from Ba Gyaw that a British officer with a transmitter would be coming to him as soon as the rains ended, and in September he sent Po Hla on a mission to Rangoon so that when this British officer arrived all the latest news from the capital of Burma would be waiting for him. It was a dangerous mission, for Po Hla was on the wanted list of the *Kempeitai*, but the latter did not waver. He was away for about six weeks. He contacted the leaders of the Karen community in Rangoon and was later able to report to Seagrim on their continued loyalty. The most important contacts he made, however, were with the Karen officers in the Burma Defence Army.

The old B.I.A., of evil memory, had been reorganised by the Japanese and was now called the Burma Defence Army, or B.D.A. About 8,000 strong, still commanded by Aung San, its uniform was almost identical with that of the Japanese and it employed Japanese methods of drill and words of command. In 1943 a Karen battalion of the B.D.A. was formed. A former Sandhurst-trained Karen officer, Hanson Kya Doe, was manoeuvred into commanding it, much against his will, and the second-in-command was a certain San Po Thin. (More will be heard about these two Karens later.) From them Po Hla learned that disaffection was rife amongst the Burmese members of the B.D.A. and that its leaders were already plotting to revolt against the Japanese as soon as they could do so with any prospect of success.

If, for a moment, we may anticipate events, the B.D.A. did



15. (a) Karen levies, old and young



(b) A group of hill Karens





16. (a) The country near Komupwado

(b) All that remains of two of Seagrim's forest hide-outs



eventually rise against the Japanese, in the spring of 1945, when large British forces were driving south towards Rangoon. The revolt was co-ordinated by a special operation from India, and the Burmese proceeded to play much the same role against the Japanese that they had played against us in 1942, namely, supplying the Winners with useful information and cutting down small parties of the Losers, especially stragglers who had lost their units. The point being made here is that the first intimation which India received of the rebellious frame of mind of the B.D.A., which was later used to our advantage, was sent by Seagrim in November, 1943, on information gathered by Po Hla in Rangoon.<sup>1</sup>

He also brought back details of the big Japanese workshops at Insein which led to a highly successful allied bombing raid in early December; details of other useful targets, Japanese unit identifications and troop movements; information about general conditions, food, clothing, prices, communications, all of which was summarised and sent to India. At Po Hla's suggestion Seagrim advised India Command *not* to bomb the New Law Courts in Rangoon, one of the main *Kempeitai* headquarters, because many captured British and American airmen were kept in the cells there.

As his next mission Seagrim sent Po Hla to make a reconnaissance of the Salween river to see if a flying-boat could

<sup>1</sup> A Burmese communist called Thein Pe, with one companion, walked out of Burma in 1942 and came into the British lines, professing utter disillusionment with the Japanese. It was thought that they might be Japanese spies and at first the British treated them with great suspicion. However, they were put to work helping with our Burmese broadcasts and propaganda, and gradually they convinced the British officers with them of their sincerity. Both volunteered for special operations. Thein Pe's companion was landed behind the Japanese lines on the Arakan coast by submarine in December, 1943, and picked up again in February, 1944. He came out with a new wife, and a recruit sent by the secretary of the Burma communist party, Thakin Soe, as well as much valuable information about conditions inside Burma and the state of mind of the Burmese nationalists. The recruit went back overland into the Arakan, but nothing more was heard of him for a long time. Then, in July, 1944, five young Burman communists, all Arakanese, came into our lines. One of them went back to Rangoon with a long microfilm message for Thakin Soe and got through successfully. But it was not really until the beginning of January, 1945, that regular communication was established with the Burmese underground resistance movement, of which the B.D.A. was a part.



land on it. Now that they were in contact with India and could receive supplies by parachute, the scope for operations was increasing, the vistas widening. But there were many things Seagrim wanted to explain in person to the people in India, things which he could not cover adequately in short wireless messages. He wanted to make a quick trip back to India and then return to the Karen hills by parachute. He conceived the idea of trying to land a plane on the Salween. Po Hla spent a week travelling down the west bank of the Salween, examining that section which flowed through Karen country. Too far north and too far south, where the Karens were mixed either with Shans or Burmese, it would have been dangerous on security grounds to make the attempt. But regretfully he had to report to Seagrim that on the Karen section of the river there were too many rocks and the current was far too strong.

Another visitor to Seagrim at this time was a Karen, formerly in the police, called Saw Henry. He had, on Seagrim's instructions, prepared a dropping zone in the Pegu Yomas about seventy miles north-west of Nyaunglebin. (Amongst the Karens who helped him was a Kyaukkyi villager, Saw Gingery, and a former Burma Oil Company engineer called Saw Jolly Nyo.) He came to report on his work and also to give Seagrim some details of dumps on the Rangoon-Mandalay road and the present state of the Sittang bridge.

The following are some typical messages sent out to India at this period:

*Premature efforts to organise levies will only result in reprisals. When Japanese more occupied by allies we can raise levies rapidly. Remember Karens are encircled by enemies. In meantime will organise intelligence.*

*Japanese making census manpower, food, transport, billeting areas Papun and district but of no other bill areas yet. We can continue hold this area against Burmese but not yet against the Japanese without trained units. All Burma expects dry weather*

*offensive. We may lose our influence if this delayed too long and Japs enter hills.*

*How many guns will be available to arm eventual Karen revolt? Can lay seeds of rebellion to cause chaos everywhere in plains and hills.*

To this message India replied asking how many guns Seagrim thought could be used. He replied:

*Two months before main allied offensive begins 8,000 arms should be dropped with British officers in the hills. When offensive begins 12,000 more arms should be dropped in Delta, Pegu Yomas and these hills to arm ex-soldiers. They will be able to cut lines of communication, check the Burmese, cause internal chaos, deny the hills and attack the Japanese.*

*To get widespread Karen assistance allies must first cause initial Japanese collapse. Karen soldiers of B.D.A. intend to desert with their arms when Japs on run. Karens seek bloody revenge on Burmese who are afraid Karens will do for allies what Burmese did for Japs in 1942.*

*On next dropping sortie please send 3,000 rupees silver. 25 silver rings. Pencils. 2 lb. tea. Books by Sundar Singh and Hall-Caine's Life of Christ.*

The days were indeed full. Seagrim must have felt that at last, after nearly two solitary years during which he had been able to do little except wait patiently, his moment for action had come. The intelligence which he was sending out was among the most valuable being received in India at that time. He undoubtedly felt that it would not be long before his organisation would be doing very much more than gathering intelligence. For when Nimmo left India in October it did look as if there would be a big British offensive to recapture Burma as soon as the rains ended. Nimmo was undoubtedly under the impression that an offensive would begin before the end of 1943.

On December 9 McCrindle jumped in to them with more wireless and four Karens. The long-delayed fourth stage of the original operational plan had at last been accomplished. But while McCrindle's arrival was part of the plan to establish three operational centres in the Karen hills, each under a British officer with a transmitter, there was also a deeper purpose to his mission. It was now quite clear in India that for various reasons which need not be detailed here there would be no large-scale allied offensive into Burma during the dry weather 1943-4. It was vital, therefore, that Seagrim and Nimmo should go slowly and carefully and do nothing, in expectation of direct military support, that would jeopardise the already very useful work they were doing. Premature action by them might provoke counter-action by the Japanese and lead to the extinction of the whole enterprise. It was important to get this information to Seagrim and Nimmo. It was realised in India that a British officer, even in the Karen hills, could not help being conspicuous, but it was felt that such a vital piece of information could not be entrusted to a Karen parachutist, however reliable, and could not be put on the air, and the only way for it to be conveyed to Seagrim and Nimmo was for a trustworthy British officer to take it in himself. It was hoped that all three men, by lying low, not moving about, and doing their work through Karens, would be able to live in the hills in the same sort of way as Seagrim had done since 1942.

A few days after McCrindle landed Seagrim summoned a meeting of all his closer followers. Ta Roe and some of the elders from Chawido and Pyagawpu, including the pastor and the schoolmaster, about ten men in all, went to Seagrim's camp in the north, and there they found, in a clearing near the camp, about fifty Karen elders assembled from villages all over Salween District. There was Seagrim, in Karen dress, Nimmo, in uniform, and another British officer, McCrindle, who was introduced to them one by one. Seagrim had bought a large pig and they first had a big feast, pork, rice, curry,

pumpkin, with good tea, sugar and canned milk that had come from India.

After they had all fed and talked for a while the meeting started and opened with a short service in Karen conducted by the pastor from Pyagawpu. They stood around in that open place in the forest, the sun filtering down through the branches overhead and stippling the ground. After some prayers the pastor read a passage from the Bible. Ta Roe does not remember the exact passage, but its burden, in his own words, was that 'without suffering we cannot come to any profit; you might say "no cross, no crown" '. They sang a hymn in Karen and the Karen national song, and Saw Po Hla and three of the parachutists sang in English, in harmony, 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me'. They finished with the Lord's Prayer.

When the service was over, Seagrim addressed them in Burmese and welcomed them and told them how happy he was that they were all there together. First of all he read them a letter, brought by McCrindle, from some of the Karens who had made their way to India in 1942 and were still there. 'We know', said this letter, 'that you Karens in Burma are undergoing much suffering. But we are always remembering you in our prayers and we ask you to remember us in your prayers.'

Then he showed them some certificates which had been received from India.<sup>1</sup> Some of these certificates, as Seagrim explained, were signed by General Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief, India, some by Lieutenant-General Pownall, chief-of-staff to Admiral Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South-east Asia. All praised the Karens for the loyalty they

<sup>1</sup> These certificates were intended for the following: Po Hla, Ah Din, Ta Roe, Digay, Arthur Ta Bi, Willie Saw, Darlington, Ba Gyaw; Saw Po Ko Aye, Seagrim's man in Shwegyin; Hanson Kya Doe and San Po Thin; Sir San C. Po, his son Orville Po, in Bassein; Dr. Johnson Kan Gyi and Saw Ba Maung in Rangoon; the Karens of Papun and the Karens of Kyaukkyi. I think Seagrim must have insisted on keeping them, not only because it would have been dangerous to distribute them, but because they would certainly have given rise to jealousies.

had shown and thanked them for what they had done. The certificates signed by General Auchinleck read:

*The loyal attitude of the Karens has been reported to me by my officers. Loyalty through so long a time in your difficult and dangerous circumstances is worthy of the highest praise. I know that many of you have borne arms in defence of your country and will bear them again to ensure final victory. In the meantime my officers and I do not forget you and the loyalty of Karenni.*

There was a blank space where Seagrim could fill in the name of the recipient. He said: 'For the present I will keep these certificates for you. It may be dangerous for you to keep them in your homes. But when our troops come back I will give them to you and you can show them to the officers and they will all know that you are loyal friends of the British.' Then he made a short speech in which he urged them to be steadfast and of good cheer and thanked them, from his side, for all that they had done for him since he first came up into the Karen hills. After this speech Ta Roe and the Pyagawpu elders presented Seagrim, Nimmo and McCrindle with three newly-woven Karen tunics which they had brought up with them, simple white garments reaching to the knees, with two broad red stripes down the front. The British officers insisted on putting them on at once and everyone laughed. Then, with much laughing and joking, they made another meal. The moon had risen and was shining through the forest trees when they finally said their good-byes. By different routes they returned to their villages. According to Ta Roe, they were all very happy.

The day after the meeting Nimmo, in accordance with the original plan, went north to establish a headquarters in the Karen country north of the Mawchi road. He took a wireless set with him and three of the Karen parachutists, Aaron, Tun Lin and He Be.

Shortly before Christmas Seagrim set Po Hla to work

translating from English into Karen a Christmas message to the Karens. When it had been translated Po Hla and the other Karens had to write out several copies and these were sent by messenger to some of Seagrim's followers and the levy section commanders, with the request that the message be passed on to the more trustworthy Karens. As far as Po Hla can remember, the message went something as follows:

*Today is Christmas Day, the day when the greatest hero the world has known was born. We Christians celebrate this day because we are His followers. If I speak to you Karens today of 'bravery', you cannot fail to associate this word with those who fought and died in this war. We Christians are soldiers of the Cross, soldiers who are commanded by our heroic leader to be brave in destroying evils.*

*The Cross is the badge worn by every true Christian. It distinguishes him from others. The Cross, as Christ wants us to understand it, signifies suffering. We Christians, His true followers, must suffer if we are to free our fellow-men from the evils of this world. If we wonder why we must suffer, let us remember that Jesus Christ, who was without sin, was nailed to a cross and suffered the most shameful death which could come to any man. How then can we, who profess to be His followers, who wear a Cross as our badge, expect to be free from suffering? By the way in which he faces suffering does a true Christian show his quality.*

On the evening of December 23 Seagrim arrived unexpectedly at Chawido with one of his Kachin boys. He told Ta Roe that he wanted to spend Christmas with him and his family and on Christmas Day to go to the service in Pyagawpu church. But Ta Roe said: 'No. You must not go there. After the Christmas service we have a sports meeting and there may be people there from far places. These people might see you and spread the news that you are here. It is not safe for you to go. But if you want to see a Christmas tree you may wait at my house and I will make you a Christmas tree, and

on the evening of Christmas Day we will have a Christmas service at my house.'

The following morning Ta Roe had to go into Pyagawpu to arrange about the sports. Seagrim gave him 150 rupees and asked him to use the money as prizes for the sports. He spent the next two days at Ta Roe's house at Chawido.

The Christmas celebrations in Pyagawpu started with a feast in a bamboo grove near the village. Four pigs were killed and many chickens, and about 300 people came from all the villages round about. After the feast about a hundred of the Christian Karens adjourned to the church for the Christmas service. Thra Po Ba, the pastor, conducted it and read to them, in that remote little mountain church in south-east Asia, the story of the birth of Christ, universal and ageless in its appeal. The choir, twenty boys and girls, with a few men, trained by Ta Roe, sang carols in Karen and the Karen national song. When they had finished the service, they had the Christmas tree. A large pine tree had been erected at one end of the church. All the children, Christian and non-Christian as well, were brought in and given presents. The previous day Ta Roe had brought down two panniers full of oranges and he had the choir distribute them amongst the children. The elders gave each other presents, too, a few cheap knick-knacks like oil-lamps bought from Indian pedlars in Pápun but mostly produce of their own homes, fruits and vegetables, oranges, cucumbers, pumpkins, paprikas, and the like, or chickens, or combs of wild honey, or home-grown tobacco, or betel-nut.

After the giving of presents they all went to an open space of ground nearby for the sports. There were hundred-yard races for the boys, seventy-five-yard races for the girls, quarter-mile, half-mile and mile races for the young men, long-jumping, high-jumping, relay-races between village teams, and special races for the old men and women which made everybody laugh. The sun was going down behind the hills when they finished.

After the distribution of the prizes Ta Roe collected Willie Saw and Arthur Ta Bi and, together with a few boys and girls from the choir, the pastor and some other elders, they walked to Chawido. All were glad to see Seagrim and he glad to see them. About seven o'clock they all sat down to a feast which Ta Roe's wife had prepared. Ta Roe had killed a pig and, knowing that Seagrim was fond of chicken, his wife had killed some fowls and prepared chicken soup and roast chicken for him. There were about thirty people present and the room was crowded.

Then they had a Christmas service in Karen, the pastor reading the lesson in English. The choir sang carols and there was also a boys' quartet which sang in harmony. They all squatted on the floor. The room was lit by the little torches which the Karens make out of pine-wood splinters. After the service came the Christmas tree and the giving of presents. Instead of a pine tree, Ta Roe had put up another coniferous tree called *ta-bo-mo-ner*, about six feet high, at one end of the room. More presents were exchanged. The pastor, Thra Po Ba, gave Seagrim another Karen tunic. He was delighted with it but said that they must forgive him for not having anything to give them. He did, however, give his revolver to Willie Saw, who needed one.

About midnight the guests took their leave and all shook hands. Seagrim thanked them all for giving him such a fine Christmas. 'I wanted to come to your service in Pyagawpu, but I was not able to do so. So I thank you all for coming to me here.'

Ta Roe asked Willie Saw and Arthur Ta Bi to spend the night with him, but they had left their blankets in Pyagawpu, and as it was a cold night they decided to return and spend the night there. Before they left, Seagrim said he wanted them to come to his camp the next day so that he could show them the certificates which had come from India. But they said: 'Tomorrow is Sunday and we must go to the service in Pyagawpu. We will come to you the next day.'



After the guests left, Seagrim talked to Ta Roe about his children, Caroline and Rosalind. He was extremely fond of them and always used to play with them, and they loved him, too. 'Your children are never afraid of me, Ta Roe. The Karen children are different from other children. Your children are neat and clean and your wife dresses them well. I think they are clever. After the war I will send them to school for you and you won't have to spend a single pice on their schooling. And if they are clever enough to go to the university, I will send them to the university, too.'

In this manner did Seagrim spend his last Christmas.

## CHAPTER 10

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The year 1944 dawned inauspiciously in Salween District. At the New Year's Day service in Pyagawpu Ta Roe learned from a friend that two Chinese had come up from Kyaukkyi, saying that they had come to buy elephant tusks, and had spent a night at a village only five miles from Seagrim's camp. It was nothing rare for Chinese to come up buying ivory, but what made the villagers suspicious about these two Chinese was that they had spent only one night in the village and had then disappeared. Ta Roe sent a message to Seagrim: 'Two Chinese last week spent a night at the village near your camp. We think they may be spies. We ask you to be careful.' Ba Gyaw, who was staying with Ta Roe at the time, set off to make enquiries about these two Chinese but could learn nothing.

A few days later a disturbing message reached Seagrim from Saw Tommer, the Karen D.C. in Papun. Three Karen agents from India had been dropped by parachute in the south of Salween District. The locality had not been well chosen. It was on the fringes of the Karen country, and the people were intermingled with Burmese. One of the parachutists had had the misfortune to land on the top of a tall clump of bamboos. His two companions had not been able to get him down and they had had to get help from the village. They had spent much money in trying to hush the affair up, but the story was all over south Salween District and, said Saw Tommer, it was certain to reach the Japanese. The three Karens, he thought, were making their way north.

These Karens, who belonged to another group engaged on special operations, were dropped unknown to Seagrim. It

was one of those unfortunate failures to co-ordinate which happen so frequently in war.

About the middle of January Ta Roe went down to Papun with one elephant to buy jaggery for his younger brother's wedding. At a village a few miles north of Papun he learned that the previous day seventeen Japanese had arrived in Papun. He decided not to go any further. The elephant he had with him was the government elephant he had bought in 1942 in Pyagawpu. It had the government arrow brand on its flanks and he was afraid that if the Japanese saw it they might seize it. So he bought a little jaggery in that village, returned north and immediately sent word to Seagrim.

These Japanese, all in uniform, told the Karens that they were members of a Goods Distribution Unit. They sold some cloth and matches at very cheap prices and distributed quinine free. The cheapness of the prices aroused the suspicions of the people, and when the Japanese in a casual sort of way asked about British officers and Karen parachutists in the hills these suspicions grew into a certainty that the main purpose of the Japanese was to collect information, not to distribute goods. Seagrim was kept posted of all these developments. In view of them he decided to move his camp. On Ta Roe's advice and with his assistance, he moved to the mountainous area near the village of Komupwado about ten miles south-west of Pyagawpu. The hills here were high, difficult of access and thickly covered with dense bamboo thickets. Having moved Seagrim and made arrangements for friends in Komupwado village to keep him supplied with food, Ta Roe returned to his village to finish the preparations for his brother's wedding.

But worse news still was to reach Seagrim. One of his levies came up from Kyaukkyi with the following story. The Japanese had learned—how, no one knew—of Po Hla's visit the previous September to Rangoon. They had arrested his parents in the Delta, his sweetheart, some relatives, and some of his recent contacts in Rangoon, including San Po

Thin. They had forced a distant relative of his, a former sub-inspector of police called Saw Charlemagne, to try and trace Po Hla and tell him that, if he did not surrender to the Japanese, the results for his family would be serious. Saw Charlemagne had come up from Rangoon and was now in Kyaukkyi.

This was a shattering piece of news and put them in a terrible quandary. Seagrim advised Po Hla to go down to Kyaukkyi, have a talk with Saw Charlemagne, and come back and report to him. Po Hla did this and reported to Seagrim that what the messenger had said was indeed all true. They now had to decide what to do. McCrindle wanted Po Hla to escape north into Siam or China. But Seagrim was quite firm. 'If Po Hla does that, many innocent people will suffer. We must think of some other way.' The only other alternative seemed to be for Po Hla to surrender to the Japanese, spin them a plausible story, and try to deceive them. McCrindle still disagreed. Then Seagrim said: 'Let us not talk any more about it for the time being. This evening we'll pray to God to give us the right decision. When we wake up in the morning, we will have the decision.' The following morning all three men, Seagrim, McCrindle and Po Hla, gave their decisions and all found that they had arrived at the same conclusion, namely, that the best thing was for Po Hla to surrender and try to deceive the Japanese. They worked out the story that Po Hla was to tell the Japanese. According to this story, Po Hla was the spoiled son of rich parents. Because they would not give him enough money, he had been trading medicines and betel in the hills with the hill Karens. He had met Seagrim, but way back in 1942, when Seagrim was on his way north trying to escape into China. Seagrim gave him a message for his mother in England. He had not seen him since then.

As regards the way in which they arrived at this vital decision, Po Hla says that Seagrim believed much more in guidance from above than he did in his own brain.

Seagrim then copied out the following verses from the Bible in his own hand and gave them to Po Hla.

*Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves;  
be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves.*

*But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to the  
councils and they will scourge you in their synagogues;*

*And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for  
my sake for a testimony against them and the Gentiles.*

*But when they deliver you up take no thought how or  
what ye shall speak, for it shall be given you in that same  
hour what ye shall speak.*

Seagrim's last instructions to Po Hla were that he was to pretend to be friendly with the Japanese, even to work with them if necessary, and to try to keep him informed of what was happening.

To put the Japanese off the scent, Po Hla, instead of going straight down from the hills to Kyaukkyi and the plains, made a long detour to the north by way of the Mawchi road and TOUNGOO. At a village near the Mawchi road he spent a night with Nimmo. The latter was desperately unhappy about the situation, but he, too, seems to have reluctantly agreed that surrender was the right course of action. Some of Nimmo's followers, when they learned what Po Hla proposed to do, wanted to kill him. One of them said: 'If Po Hla surrenders we shall no longer be able to keep our activities secret. If indeed Po Hla must surrender, please ask for 1,000 rifles to be dropped to us from India, so that at least we can die fighting.' Nimmo is said to have replied: 'Remember, Po Hla is one of our old comrades. Even if you kill him, that still won't quieten the suspicions of the Japanese, and much suffering will come to his relatives. If he surrenders, he may be able to play a double game with the Japanese.'

Po Hla surrendered to Warrant-Officer Nakayama in

Nyaunglebin on January 23 and was taken to Rangoon. The Japanese accepted his story and he was well treated. One night he was even taken out to dinner by the commander of the Rangoon *Kempeitai*, Colonel Suniyoshi, who asked him to help the Japanese in obtaining the co-operation of the Karens. He was also successful in getting a letter secretly to Seagrim telling him what had happened.

Meanwhile, a *Kempeitai* detachment under Captain Motoichi Inoue arrived in Kyaukkyi on January 31. They did not pretend to be a Goods Distribution Unit and made no secret of the purpose of their mission. They wanted information about British officers and Karen parachutists in the hills. Their methods were the usual Japanese mixture of cajolery and brutality. While they put on cinema shows with a small projector for the townsfolk and distributed bags of sweets to the children, they also arrested and proceeded to torture a number of Karens. Amongst those arrested was an old soldier of the Burma Rifles, Jemadar Maung Wah, who was Seagrim's levy commander in Kyaukkyi. He was interrogated about Seagrim, the Karen parachutists and the levies. He refused to give any information and was beaten again and again, the usual technique of the Japanese being to tie his hands behind his back, string him up to a beam with his feet off the ground, and then lash him back and front with bamboo poles. After three days of this treatment, during which he never gave anything away, Maung Wah was told by the Japanese that he was to go up into the hills. If he did not return within one week with full details of Seagrim's whereabouts and a map of his camp and sentry posts, they would start to take action against his family. On no account was he to tell Seagrim that the Japanese were in Kyaukkyi or that he had been sent by him.

Sadly Maung Wah headed for the hills. He was taken to the new camp at Komupwado. He told Seagrim everything that had happened and showed him the red weals on his

wrists and the bruises on his body. Tears came into Seagrim's eyes and he said: 'This is the price which you Karens are paying for your loyalty.' Maung Wah then asked Seagrim to send to India for arms and ammunition to be dropped by aeroplane so that they could attack the Japanese. All the levies round Kyaukkyi wanted to fight, no matter what the odds. Seagrim listened to him, and then said that he would send a message to India. He asked Maung Wah to wait at his camp until a reply came. It came in the evening. But India was quite firm. The time for a Karen rising against the Japanese had not yet come. It could not possibly succeed and would only result in Japanese reprisals and unnecessary suffering to the Karens. Seagrim read the message to Maung Wah. The latter then begged Seagrim to kill him. Death seemed to him the only way out. But Seagrim said: 'Go back to Kyaukkyi and tell the Japanese everything you know. God will look after you.' Before Maung Wah left the camp Seagrim wrote out a letter which he asked him to deliver on the way to the elders in Pyagawpu.

Maung Wah returned to Kyaukkyi. From some villagers he met on the way he learned that the Japanese had found the cache where the levies kept their weapons. One of the levies, a young boy, had broken down under torture and had told the Japanese everything he knew, not only where the cache was but also the location of Seagrim's camp in the hills. On receipt of this news Maung Wah wanted to run away and hide in the forest. He prayed to God to help him. Eventually he decided that he must not be cowardly, he must go into Kyaukkyi and face the worst. So he went in and reported to the Japanese. They abused him and told him he was a liar and the ring-leader of the levies. But they did not ask him many questions. They now had the information they wanted. The following day many more Japanese troops, not *Kempeitai* but regular infantry, arrived in Kyaukkyi, and they all set off for the hills taking a few Karens with them.



17. (a) Traffic on paths in the  
Karen hills



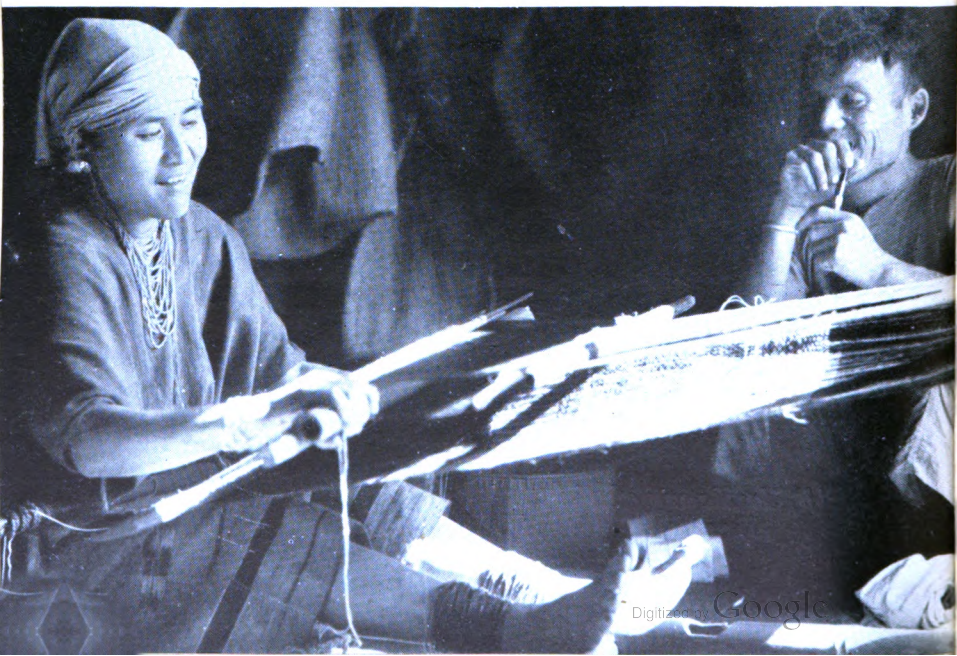
(b) Traffic on paths in the  
Karen hills





18. (a) Carving a wooden bowl

(b) Weaving



When they received the letter brought down by Maung Wah the elders of Pyagawpu, together with Ba Gyaw and Thet Wa, met in the church. The letter said that if the Japanese came up into the hills to hunt him down, Seagrim had three courses of action open to him. He could commit suicide. He could give himself up to the Japanese. Or he could make his way north into Karenni State. Which of these three courses, in the opinion of the Pyagawpu elders, would be in the best interests of the Karens?

They discussed the matter and all agreed that he should try to escape to the north. Several of them, including Ta Roe, set off for Komupwado to inform him of their decision, but when they arrived there in the evening they found the camp deserted. They had taken no food with them, expecting to feed at the camp, and so they bedded down for the night hungry in the two deserted lean-to shelters. They did not know where Seagrim had moved to and in the morning they returned to their village. Ta Roe was busy clearing a *taungya* on the hillside, ready for that spring's planting.

What had happened was that in the interests of security Seagrim had decided to keep on the move, never to remain in one camp for very long. He had already informed India that he was going off the air. Of the three transmitters, one was with Nimmo in the north; the second Seagrim decided to keep with him; the third he entrusted to Ba Gyaw and Thet Wa. He told them to go north and hide for a time. If anything happened to Nimmo in the north and himself and McCrindle in the south, they were to signal India. Seagrim evidently hoped that if they went off the air and all lay low for a few weeks the trouble might blow over.

One of the last messages to reach Seagrim from Papun was from Arthur Ta Bi, the Township Officer. Arthur said that the Japanese in Papun were continually making enquiries about him. He suggested that Seagrim signal India and ask them to drop the recently deceased body of a tall European. The Karens would tell the Japanese that Seagrim

had died in the forest and would produce the corpse as evidence. But this original suggestion apparently only reached Seagrim after he had decided to close down the wireless sets.

On February 13 Captain Inoue and his *Kempeitai* detachment, and a company of infantry under the command of Captain Yamaguchi, arrived in Pyagawpu from Kyaukkyi and made their headquarters in the church. They immediately arrested Ta Roe and several elders. They told them they knew Seagrim had his headquarters near Komupwado. They were going to attack the headquarters the following day. Ta Roe and the elders were to accompany them. With the Japanese, under arrest, were some of the Kyaukkyi Karens, including the young levy who had been tortured into talking, and also Saw Po Hla. The latter was in very bad odour with the Japanese, for they now knew his part in the whole show and they realised that he had been deceiving them with a lot of lies.

The following morning they left for the village of Komupwado. Here they arrested two young boys who used to take food up to Seagrim's camp. The boys denied all knowledge of Seagrim, whereupon the Japanese strung them up with their hands behind their backs and their feet off the ground and beat them at regular intervals. After two hours of this treatment one of the two boys confessed that he had on several occasions taken food to Seagrim, but when he had last gone up he had found the camp deserted. The Japanese made him guide them up to the camp and surrounded it in formal military fashion. But the camp, as the boy had said, was deserted. The Japanese were very angry and slapped and kicked some of the Karens. Then they all climbed down the hill, spent a short while in Komupwado village and set off to return to Pyagawpu. On the way they saw four young Karens who, as soon as they saw the Japanese, dashed off. The Japanese gave chase and captured one of them. He was a young man of about twenty-five. On him

they found some Indian silver rupees and a British .38 revolver. He said that he was an ex-soldier and that he had had the coins and the revolver since before the evacuation in 1942. It did not sound convincing to Captain Inoue, who promptly ordered him to be put through the treatment already described. The Karen broke down, confessed that he was indeed one of Seagrim's followers, and that he had been sent down to keep a watch on the tracks. He promised to guide the Japanese to Seagrim's new camp.

So they turned back and spent the night at Komupwado village. They left it at first light and the young Karen took them up the hill-side by a new route and showed them, from a distance of half a mile, where the new camp was located. The Japanese surrounded it and closed in. It was on the side of a gully, amid thickets of bamboo, a dark place which the sun seldom reached through the overhanging branches of the trees.

The men in the camp must have heard the Japanese coming. They made a dash for it, through the bamboo thickets, across the gully. The nearest Japanese opened fire. McCrindle was shot down on the far side of the gully, firing his revolver at the Japanese. But the others all got away. There was desultory firing for about half an hour, and the rest of the day was spent in combing the hill-side. But the search was fruitless. Inoue picked up Seagrim's Bible and then the small shelter was burned down.

The Japanese buried McCrindle where he fell. Like Seagrim, he was wearing Karen dress. They then returned to Komupwado. A Japanese corporal whom McCrindle shot in the chest died that evening. Every day for the next month Captain Yamaguchi sent patrols up into the hills round Komupwado searching for Seagrim and the others. The beatings of the villagers continued, even though the Japanese realised that the Karens knew as little as they did themselves where their quarry was hiding.

Today, two and a half years after that ambush in the Karen

hills, nothing remains to show that human beings ever camped on the side of the gully except two or three charred and rotting bamboo poles. Nor have efforts to find McCrindle's body been successful. Somewhere on that remote hill-side he lies, beneath a pall of loam and bamboo leaves, a brave man who went down fighting.

## CHAPTER 11

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Nimmo's camp in the north was attacked the following day. But let us go back a few weeks and briefly trace his movements after he left Seagrim in December the day following the meeting in the forest.

One of the Karen parachutists, Tun Lin, had gone north ahead of Nimmo and told Thra May Sha, the pastor of Mawtudo village, who had looked after Seagrim for several months in 1942, that Seagrim wanted him to make arrangements to look after another British officer. Thra May Sha immediately consulted with his neighbour, Thra Kyaw Lay, of Ubo village, and they built some huts for Nimmo in the forest. While the huts were being prepared, Nimmo stayed at a village further south with Francis Ah Mya, the Anglican Karen priest who has been mentioned earlier. On January 6 Thra Kyaw Lay arrived at this village to collect Nimmo and take him up to Mawtudo. It had been raining and they travelled only by night, with the result that it took them four days to reach Mawtudo. With Nimmo were four parachutists, Tun Lin, He Be, Saw Sunny and Saw Pe; the old elephant driver, Ji Bu, who on former occasions had acted as guide to both Seagrim and Ras Pagani; two old Burma riflemen, Saw Myin, a wireless operator, and Tun Lin's brother, Jemadar Toe Kin; and Saw Media, who before the war had been a theological student at Insein Baptist Seminary. They installed themselves at one of the camps and Thra May Sha and Thra Kyaw Lay used to take up supplies every two or three days.

Nimmo established contact with several Karen timber contractors whom he had known well before the war and

also with some of the Karens who had been prominent in 1942 in the Northern Karen Levies under Smith and Boyt. To his most trusted men he distributed some of the K rings which McCrindle had brought from India. These were simple rings of pure silver with the letter K engraved on the inside. They were intended as a reward for outstanding services and they were given also in the hope that when the British forces returned to Burma the owners of the rings would be able to display them as evidence that they were loyal friends of the British. Nimmo appears to have taken the entire stock of K rings north with him, for neither Seagrim nor McCrindle distributed any further south. Amongst others to whom Nimmo gave these rings were both Thra May Sha and his wife, Thra Kyaw Lay, Saw Rupert and a former Magregor contractor called Saw Ta Tu Tu.

With the aid of these men Nimmo quickly built up an efficient intelligence organisation and started to send some useful information to India about targets in Toungoo, Japanese troop movements and unit identifications. He and his men never stayed longer than two days in one camp and then moved to another. The only time he left was to go to a village called Buko, two days' journey to the east, to meet the chief minister of Kyetbogyi state, one of the three semi-independent Karen states. He travelled by night and the meeting took place very secretly at a prearranged rendezvous.

It was shortly after he returned from this meeting that a large force of Japanese troops under the command of Captain Morino, *Kempeitai* chief at Toungoo, came up in trucks along the Mawchi road, and, leaving their vehicles at a village on the road, headed straight for Mawtudo village. They evidently had information, presumably gathered by Inoue at Kyaukkyi, that Nimmo's camp was in the forest not far from Mawtudo. The same thing happened as happened further south. Nearly all the Karens in Mawtudo knew where Nimmo's camps were. Morino's *Kempeitai* men arrested half a dozen villagers, some of whom they already

suspected, and put them through the third degree. One of them broke down and agreed to guide the Japanese to the camp.

It was surrounded and attacked at first light the following morning, February 15. Nimmo came dashing out of the hut with a revolver, was shot in the head and killed instantly. The Japanese captured Saw Pe, who was shot in the arm, and He Be. All the others escaped, Toe Kin and Media being slightly wounded.

Nimmo was wearing black Shan pants and a sports shirt. The Japanese did not trouble to bury him and just left the body where it fell. That afternoon some Karens went up from Mawtudo village, dug a grave and put a cairn of stones over it. A few days later a Karen pastor went up and said the funeral service in Karen.

Nimmo and McCrindle were both dead. But Seagrim still remained at liberty. Angry that he should continue to elude them, the Japanese intensified their persecution of the villagers and a veritable reign of terror began for the unfortunate Karens. Parties of Japanese soldiers were stationed in all the larger villages. The villagers were forcibly organised into groups and sent out, men, women and children, to search the hill-sides from morning till night. Not only did they have to provide food for the Japanese quartered in their villages but they themselves were unable to get on with the preparations for the planting of rice in May. More and more of them were beaten up or ill-treated by the Japanese. The Karens thought that Seagrim must long ago have perished in the forest or been eaten by the wild beasts. But the Japanese were convinced that he was still alive and that the Karens were still looking after him. They said: 'We shall not believe he is dead until his body is produced.'

What had happened to Seagrim was this. Two of his followers, who were with him at the time of the ambush,



were a young parachutist from India called Pa Ah, and a young ex-soldier of the Burma Rifles called Ohn Gyaw. They had dashed into the forest like the others, but contrived to remain together. They made their way through the forest, up the hill-side and away from the scene of the ambush, and that afternoon came to a little stream. They sat down by it to rest and have a drink. Soon they heard the noise of someone coming through the undergrowth. Ohn Gyaw ran away but Pa Ah took cover and waited to see who it was. It was Seagrim. Pa Ah called out to him, they met, and then they shouted to Ohn Gyaw to come back. All three sat down by that little stream and held a council of war. Now Pa Ah's sister had married a man in Mewado village about twenty-five miles to the south-east, just seven miles north of Papun. The old village of Mewado, on the banks of the Yunzalin, had been burned down by the B.I.A. in 1942 and the villagers had then moved to a site high up in the hills. Pa Ah suggested that they make for Mewado. He felt sure his brother-in-law would hide them and feed them.

It took them five days to reach Mewado. They avoided all tracks and villages, moving slowly through the forest, living on the raw green shoots of certain plants and drinking water from streams. They skirted Mewado and made for a point about one hour's climb above the village. Seagrim and Ohn Gyaw waited under a large tree of the kind called *Na-paw-kyaw* (from whose bark the Karens make a bitter brew with which to cure fever), while Pa Ah went down into the village. That night he saw his sister and brother-in-law, and the following morning returned with the headman, a retired forest ranger, speaking a little English, who had met Seagrim on several occasions. The headman willingly agreed to keep them supplied with food and wanted to build a hut for them. But Seagrim said this would be too dangerous. They would sleep on the ground under the trees. So the three of them stayed up on the hill-side and every two or three days the old headman brought food to them.

The Japanese knew that Pa Ah was one of Seagrim's followers and had been with him at the time of the ambush. Learning that he had relatives in Mewado, they conjectured that he would in all probability make for that village sooner or later. Several times they sent parties to Mewado who bullied the villagers and threatened the brother-in-law that unless he revealed Pa Ah's whereabouts his whole family would be arrested. The villagers at first denied all knowledge of Pa Ah, but then became more and more frightened and finally they decided to ask Pa Ah to surrender, while Seagrim and Ohn Gyaw remained in hiding and continued to be supplied from Mewado. Pa Ah discussed it with Seagrim who also thought it the best thing to do if Pa Ah could tell the Japanese some plausible story.

Pa Ah surrendered to the Japanese in Pyagawpu and successfully denied all knowledge of Seagrim and his followers. He had been hiding in the forest, he said, since the day of the ambush and he had not seen any of the others. The Japanese apparently believed his story and took him down to Kyaukkyi. More and more Karens were being arrested by the Japanese and subjected to beatings, slappings, kickings and other brutalities by the *Kempeitai*. Day and night, in the house at Kyaukkyi where he was kept under arrest, Pa Ah could see men being beaten and hear the most pitiful moanings and groanings. Many Karens, under this treatment, confessed to quite imaginary misdeeds, thereby implicating, and causing to be arrested, more and more innocent people. Pa Ah's conscience troubled him unceasingly. He had to talk to someone and unburden his mind. The man he chose to talk to, by an unfortunate coincidence, was that same young Karen who, early in February, had revealed Seagrim's presence at Komupwado to the Japanese and the location of the Kyaukkyi levies' cache of arms. By all reports this young Karen had become, by this time, a willing and favoured agent of the Japanese. Pa Ah could have chosen no worse confidant. The young Karen went

occasions gave the Japanese valuable information, but it is wrong to simplify something that was in reality fairly complex and to lose sight of the salient points of the whole affair. These salient points were three-fold.

Firstly, at that stage of the war, when the British forces had not yet crossed the western mountain boundaries of Burma and broken into the central plain, the presence of three white men over in the eastern mountains could not long remain a secret, especially to an internal intelligence organisation as ruthless and efficient as the *Kempeitai*. As well expect three negro agents of the Nazis to remain for long unnoticed in the mountains of Wales.

Secondly, the Karens, like all simple people, have no idea of security. Even with the Karens being trained in India for special operations, there was trouble over security. If these Karens, who had security drummed into them every day, talked too freely to their friends, it may be imagined how much more so did the illiterate folk of the hill villages. At every stage far more Karens knew of the whereabouts of the camps and all the other details than was prudent from the point of view of security. But it was unavoidable.

Thirdly, the Japanese method of gathering intelligence, which proceeds on the theory that a man will talk much more freely if he is first scared out of his wits, works with simple people like the Karens. It is no reflection on the courage of the Karens, certainly none on their loyalty, that a few individuals, out of the hundreds who were brutally ill-treated by the professional sadists of the *Kempeitai*, broke down and told what they knew.

Although the Japanese failed to capture Seagrim or even to find traces of him when they raided Pyagawpu in February, 1943 (the time that Maung Shwe became D.C. in Papun), they continued to keep a close watch on the Karen hills, especially from Toungoo. At the end of June of that year the Toungoo *Kempeitai* appear to have sent four Burmese spies up into the hills. They were intercepted by Karen levies not

far from Kyaukkyi. The Burmans said that they had come up to buy fifteen buffaloes in Pyagawpu, but they only had eighteen rupees between them and this made the Karens suspicious. The Karens grilled them, and one of the Burmans, hoping to save his skin at the expense of his companions, confessed that they had been sent up by the *Kempeitai*. The Karens shot the lot.

It is possible that the noise of planes overhead on nights when the moon was full had made the Japanese suspicious.

In October, 1943, this same section of levies outside Kyaukkyi arrested a Burman and an Indian who said that they had been dropped by parachute from India and wanted to be guided to Seagrim's camp. The Karens held them and sent to Seagrim for instructions. Word came back from Seagrim that if the two men could produce their parachutes they might be brought to him, but, failing that, the levy section commander could do what he thought best. The Indian later split on the Burman and said that they had been promised 30,000 rupees by the Toungoo *Kempeitai* if they brought back information about Seagrim's whereabouts in the hills.

There are some details available from Japanese sources which help to complete the picture.

News of the dropping of three Karen parachutists in south Salween District late in 1943 (one, it will be remembered, had the bad luck to get stuck on top of a clump of bamboos) appears to have reached Japanese *Kempeitai* headquarters in Rangoon both from their Thaton and Toungoo posts. It was on receipt of this news that they decided to send *Kempeitai* detachments to Papun and Kyaukkyi to make further enquiries.

The Papun detachment, which pretended to be a Goods Distribution Unit, was commanded by Captain Inosuke Kurokata of the Counter-Espionage Branch in Rangoon. Kurokata does not play an important part in this story, but it is interesting to note that when he was in Papun he tried to send a letter through three different channels to Seagrim. The text of the letter, he says, was as follows:

Dear Major Seagrim,

*You have been biding in the hills round Papun for two years and must be undergoing extreme hardships. As a professional soldier like yourself, I admire you. But the Japanese are now forming expeditions against you from Papun, Toungoo, Mawchi and Kyaukkyi. Your chances will be slight. If within ten days of receiving this letter you surrender to me, I promise that you will not be killed but will be treated honourably as a prisoner of war.*

*Signed,*

KUROKATA INOSUKE.

It is not known whether Seagrim ever received this letter.

Captain Motoichi Inoue, in charge of the *Kempeitai* detachment which went to Kyaukkyi, was, previous to this assignment, in charge of the *Kempeitai* post at Pegu. Shortly after he left for Kyaukkyi, and Kurokata for Papun, the Japanese High Command in Rangoon decided to send a *Tobatsutai* (a 'subjugation' or 'pacification' unit) into the Karen hills. This was to consist of four companies of regular troops from the 24th Independent Mixed Brigade under the command of Colonel Ohara. These troops were to leave from Mawchi, Kyaukkyi and Papun, and converge on Pyagawpu about February 15. (Captain Yamaguchi and the troops who ambushed both Nimmo and McCrindle came from this force.) Although Colonel Ohara was to be in overall command of the expedition, all dealings with the Karens were to be in the hands of the *Kempeitai* officers.

Inoue, like many Japanese officers, came of a poor peasant family. After finishing middle-school, where he learned to read a little English, he returned to the family farm in Okayama prefecture on the northern shore of the Inland Sea. He was called up for military service, and, at its conclusion, decided to become a regular soldier. In 1932, after the Manchurian Incident, he was posted to the *Kempeitai*, and obtained his commission in 1940 after several years' service in north

China. He had come to Burma from Peking in December, 1942.

Inoue was a hard, efficient, energetic Japanese officer. Although he did not personally take part in the brutalities against the Karens—these were left to *Kempeitai* N.C.O.s—he ordered them, knew about them, condoned them. They were just part of the routine, part of the specialised department of the Japanese Army to which he had belonged for twelve years. He accepted these things as unquestioningly as he did the militant patriotic beliefs which, first imbibed at primary and middle-school, had been even deeper instilled into him after he joined the *Kempeitai*, guardians as they were of the nation's 'right thinking'. He was, of course, fond of children and devotedly attached to a small son whom he had not seen for several years.

Inoue's impression of Seagrim was that he was 'a gentleman, a man of high character'. He greatly respected him for asking so persistently that the Karens be treated leniently.

## CHAPTER 12

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From now on we catch only fragmentary glimpses of Seagrim.

The prisoners at the *Kempeitai* headquarters in the New Law Courts were kept in eleven cells in an inner courtyard. Each cell was about fifteen feet long, ten feet wide and eighteen feet high. At the back was a brick wall. On either side were partitions of heavy boards packed with sawdust, to prevent the prisoners in one cell talking to those in another. In front were stout wooden bars reaching to the ceiling. Barbed wire was strung across the roof and no light came in except from the passage-way in front. In one corner of the cell was a rusty commode which one of the prisoners had to empty each morning. The cell was entered by a small trap-door, heavily bolted and padlocked. Food was passed through a gap in the bars. A sentry paced to and fro in the passage-way outside and the prisoners had to squat on the floor facing the passage-way. They were not allowed to talk to each other, but occasionally, when the sentry was not near, they could exchange a few whispered remarks. In each cell was posted a notice in English.

1. Prisoners must not talk to each other.
2. Prisoners must not walk about.
3. Prisoners must keep their room clean and tidy.
4. Prisoners must not make any noise.
5. Prisoners must obey the orders of the guards.
6. Prisoners must stand and bow when an officer comes.

Food was passed through the bars twice a day, usually at noon and evening. Each man received an old rusty jam tin

half-filled with boiled and soggy rice, with beans and bean-curd and odds and ends mixed in it. They did, or did not, depending on the whim of the sentry, receive any water. Sometimes men went for three and four days without water. Sometimes half a jam tin of water was expected to do for twelve men. Usually there were six to nine men in each cell, but sometimes there would be twenty or thirty and at night they would have to pack themselves tightly like sardines.

Many accounts have been written of the filthy conditions in these Japanese prisons, and of the dauntless courage which their wretched inmates seem invariably to have shown. An eloquent sidelight on conditions in the New Law Courts cells at Rangoon is provided by the inscriptions carved or written on the walls. After the reoccupation of Rangoon I jotted some down in a note-book. The Japanese had tried to obliterate the inscriptions, but many still remained.

There were many names on the walls of British, American, Indian, Burmese, Chinese and Karen prisoners. To keep count of the days, which must have seemed so desperately endless, prisoners carved calendars on the walls or made notches for each day that passed. Most of the calendars covered at least one month and several extended up to five months. The following are some of the inscriptions:

*i arrived in this cell on the 29th april 1943.*

G  
O  
D  
I  
G O D I S L O V E  
L  
O  
V  
E



*F/O ..... R.A.F. (and the address)  
Died June 25, 1944,  
cause of death unknown.*

*So this is the Army*

PRAISE V GOD  
XMAS 1944  
NEW ▽ YEAR  
1945

*GOOD OLD U.S.A.*

*G. H. E. Smith,  
5th columnist,  
said you.*

In Burmese:

*Every man should worship God every day.*

Again in Burmese:

*Give me rice three times a day. Give me water four times a day.  
Those under suspicion should be kept here only five to ten days.  
It is far too crowded. You have only a bath once a week. When  
they hit the iron gong at 9.30 Japanese time, it is lights out.*

In Burmese, probably written by a Karen:

*Don't forget your parents.  
Don't forget your God.*

In very high-flown Pali, presumably a Buddhist text, written by an educated Burman:

*Ye people of Burma, who are abiding in the bottest corner of bell, forget not your Gods nor your religion nor the other deities whom you worship.*

which might be paraphrased:

*Forget not your God in the day of trouble.*

And lastly:

*Aung Bu died on November 22, 1944.  
cause of death TB.*

He was a young parachutist, and he died not of T.B. but of beri-beri. For eight days before his death he was given no water at all. His best friend was called out of another cell and told to stuff the body into an old gunny-sack and take it out into the courtyard and put it on a stretcher.

So full became the New Law Courts cells in 1944 that the overflow had to be put into the lock-up of the old Barr Street police station, just round the corner. Conditions here were the same, and here, too, the walls tell the same story.

Two rooms at the lock-up, over whose doors were written the words FEMALE CAGE, served as a torture chamber. In one of them there was a water pipe and tap, from which prisoners would be given the notorious Japanese 'water-treatment'. Bound hand and foot, and forced to lie down under the tap, their nostrils would be held and water poured down into their stomachs. Sometimes the water was injected through the nose. When their stomachs were bursting the *Kempeitai* guards would jump on them and make the water spout forth. The Japanese also devised a way of giving electric shocks, applying the terminals to the more sensitive parts of the body. Burnings with cigarettes were a routine occurrence. A prisoner would be made to stand with his hands tied behind

his neck. The Japanese would take a lighted cigarette and hold it before the Prisoner. 'You see this cigarette,' he would say. 'The British are like this. Outside they are white, like this cigarette. But inside they are red-hot . . . like this'—and he would apply the lighted end of the cigarette to the prisoner's face or arms or body. Sometimes the prisoners were held upside-down for several hours, suspended from a beam in the ceiling. Beatings, clubbings, slappings, were so common that little was thought of them and they came to be regarded as a merciful alternative to grimmer ordeals.

These tortures were all part and parcel of the *Kempeitai* system, designed to give that organisation a name whose lightest mention should strike fear into the hearts of men. They were inflicted on all who came into the *Kempeitai* clutches, innocent and guilty alike. They were inflicted by men, born, like so many of their victims, in simple Eastern peasant homes, who had been conditioned by an evil system. The *Kempeitai* was a system within a system. It was quintessentially evil.

It is not known whether Seagrim was subjected to these tortures or not. Saw Darlington once saw him with a black bruise on his face. On the other hand there is evidence which suggests that, to begin with at any rate, the Japanese tried to induce him to use the very great influence which he had with the Karens to bring them over to the Japanese side.

Most of the time he was kept in a cell alone, or else with Indian or Burmese prisoners. The Japanese tried to keep him apart both from the Karens and from Europeans. Ta Roe, however, spent one night in the same cell with him. Three men, he says, were sitting on the floor of the cell when he entered, Seagrim, an English airman and a Chinese. Seagrim was very surprised to see Ta Roe. As soon as the Japanese sentry passed out of earshot, he whispered:

'Why are you here, Ta Roe?'

'I was brought by the Japanese.'

'Did you come alone or with others?'

'I came with others.'

'Who are they?'

Ta Roe gave their names, Digay, Willie Saw, Arthur Ta Bi and many other Karens from Salween District.

Then Seagrim said: 'The Japanese are very bad men, Ta Roe. They said that if I surrendered they would stop troubling the Karens. But now they have arrested you and the others. They are not to be trusted. But don't worry, Ta Roe. We are Christians and must have faith in God. Christ came down to earth and suffered on a cross. We must suffer like Him.'

Just then the Japanese sentry heard them whispering and shouted to them to be quiet. As they could not talk, Seagrim picked up his Bible and looked out a verse which he showed to Ta Roe. It read: 'If we die with Him, we shall also live with Him.' They could not talk any more. They slept the night in the cell and early the next morning Ta Roe was moved to another cell.

Nearly all the Karens who have been mentioned in this book were at this time either in the New Law Courts cells or in the lock-up of the Barr Street police station, Digay, Darlington, Ah Din, Ba Gyaw, Arthur Ta Bi, Willie Saw, Thra May Sha, Thra Kyaw Lay, Saw Rupert,<sup>1</sup> Saw Henry, Po Hla, Thet Wa, Jemadar Maung Wah, Pa Ah, Saw Judson,<sup>2</sup> Saw Po Myin,<sup>3</sup> and about forty others. Some had been arrested by the *Kem-peitai* in the hills. The majority, when they learned that Seagrim had surrendered, had followed their leader's example and surrendered, too.

Pa Ah, the young Karen parachutist who had been with Seagrim at Mewado, contracted dysentery. There was no medical attention; the cells were filthy; flies abounded by day and mosquitoes by night; beri-beri, scabies, dysentery and malaria were rife amongst the prisoners. Poor Pa Ah suffered,

<sup>1</sup> Thra May Sha's brother, headman of a village near the Mawchi road, who had helped Seagrim in the early days and, at a later date, Nimmo.

<sup>2</sup> A schoolboy from Papun whose father had been murdered by the B.I.A.

<sup>3</sup> The police station officer from Pyagawpu. Originally sent there by Maung Shwe, the Burmese D.C. of Salween District, he had given Seagrim much assistance.

not only from dysentery, but from a tormenting conscience. He could not forgive himself for having spoken to the young Karen collaborator at Kyaukkyi and thus being instrumental in revealing Seagrim's whereabouts to the Japanese. He felt that he had betrayed his leader and was responsible for Seagrim being in prison. This mental torture, more than anything else, weakened his resistance and vitality. He became weaker and weaker and finally could not rise from the floor. Death came to him at last—as it did to many others in that terrible place. Ohn Gyaw, who surrendered with Seagrim, died of dysentery. Tun Shwe, another parachutist, who had dropped with Ba Gyaw sixteen months previously, died from beri-beri. So did the two young Kachins, Zu Ri and La Mauk Gan, who had been with Seagrim ever since the summer of 1942. So did two of Ah Din's men, Maung Gyaw and Shwe Ka Yin. Saw Enoch, one of the three Karens who had dropped in December south of Papun, died of malaria.

Apart from Ta Roe's brief encounter, the only other record we have of Seagrim at this period comes from a young R.A.F. officer, Flight-Lieutenant Arthur Sharpe, shot down over Burma, who was confined in the New Law Courts cells from March to August, 1944. On only one occasion, however, did he get an opportunity to exchange more than a few whispered sentences with Seagrim. The latter told him of the uncovering of his organisation in the hills and talked about the Karens and how marvellous they had been. The young airman writes: 'In case no further evidence comes to light, I would like to conclude with a very inadequate appreciation of Major Seagrim. I believe him to be the finest gentleman I have ever met. He had a complete disregard for his own life and at the same time the greatest concern for the Karen N.C.O.s and men under him. His men informed me that he was not captured by the Japanese but gave himself up after they had repeatedly taken cruel reprisals against the villagers who were shielding him. He had developed a profound philosophy and a strong religious faith. He was ever cheerful and caused

us much subdued laughter in neighbouring cells with his constant witty backchat at the expense of Japanese guards. His personality commanded the greatest respect from every Briton and American in the gaol. The Karens, themselves Christians, who came under his influence, held him in great reverence. Their regard was such that they expressed a willingness to die for him. I personally saw two of his most faithful followers die in great agony. Major Seagrim's concern for his men was expressed in the request he managed to pass round the cells to the British and American prisoners that each of his Karens should be treated as one of ourselves. He was very worried about the breakdown of his plans and specially the hardship which it had brought upon the Karen villagers.'

Sharpe recalls Seagrim's arrival at the cells. 'I saw him as he was led in, handcuffed, by a strutting Japanese N.C.O. of above average stature. I was strangely stirred the moment I saw him, his tall, proud, erect figure, his fine-cut, sun-tanned features, high forehead and deep-set kindly eyes. He had a fine beard which increased his aristocratic and unassumed appearance of superiority over ordinary men. I knew at once that I had seen an exceptional personality.'

One evening an officer from Sharpe's squadron died from dysentery and beri-beri. 'As was our custom,' writes Sharpe, 'we all stood, said the Lord's Prayer, and read a passage from the New Testament. On this occasion Seagrim was asked to conduct the short service. He read a brief passage and then continued with an impromptu prayer of his own, which, for the benefit of the Japs, he pretended to read from the New Testament. I would like to be able to recall that prayer word for word. It moved me deeply and was an insight into Seagrim's very soul. Nothing could reveal better this man's wonderful character than those words which are now lost. A tribute to the dead, a prayer for the living, and, greatest of all, a word for his cruel captors, for of the Japs he said, in the words of Christ, "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do".'

It is strange how, although the Japanese evidently tried to segregate him, Seagrim's personality and influence could not be bounded by the four walls of a cell and spread right through that prison in Rangoon. Even the Japanese sentries seem to have felt it. After they were moved to Insein, a Japanese sentry who was trying to pick up a little English said to Po Hla: 'Big Master—hearto—very good.' The Japanese sentries used to call him 'Big Master' and sometimes 'Seagrim Master'. (The English word Master, it should be explained, was the one by which the Japanese always insisted upon being addressed by the Burmese.)

During the first part of July Seagrim and most of the Karens who had been prominent in the movement in the hills were transferred to the gaol at Insein, some six miles outside Rangoon, and put in the former reformatory next to the gaol. The gaol itself was reserved for prisoners who had been convicted in Burmese courts by Dr. Ba Maw's Burmese administration. The reformatory was reserved for prisoners of the *Kempeitai* who had been convicted locally in Rangoon but whose sentences had not yet been promulgated. We know that Seagrim's case was referred both to the headquarters at Saigon of Field-Marshal Count Terauchi, supreme Japanese commander of all these southern regions, and also to the War Office in Tokyo. Until a sentence passed locally had been confirmed by these two higher bodies prisoners were kept out at Insein. Also kept here were Japanese soldiers convicted of military offences.

A few years before the war, the reformatory had been turned into a gaol for political offenders, the so-called B-class prisoners. By a strange irony several of the young Burmans who were prominent in the B.I.A. and in Dr. Ba Maw's government served sentences here before the war.

The reformatory is a self-contained compound, about 200 yards across at its widest point, surrounded by a high wall. All the prison staff were Japanese. The elderly moustachioed Japanese captain in charge had his office and living quarters

just above the gateway. Most of the prisoners were kept in a building inside the gateway on the right. The ground floor had cells with wooden bars evidently built by the same contractor who had built those in the New Law Courts. These cells were larger, airier and drier and in them were kept the Japanese prisoners. The upper floor was divided into two large rooms with an iron grill between. Here were kept Karens, Indians, Burmans, Chinese and other prisoners. Just beyond this building was a long row of cells, where special prisoners were kept in solitary confinement. Each was about twelve feet square, with cement floor and walls. In one of these Seagrim was kept alone.

Adjoining this row of single cells was the carpentry shop, a large wooden shed, and, beyond it, the old reformatory schoolroom, a long room, about sixty yards long and twenty-five yards wide, with windows all the way down. Close to the schoolroom were the hospital, the small Buddhist shrine, the mortuary and, right in the middle of the compound, the octagonal cook-house.

The Karens in the upstairs room never had an opportunity to talk to Seagrim, but they used to see him sometimes in the mornings emptying his pot.

On September 1 the Karens were told that the following day five Japanese officers would come and pass sentence on them. About seven the following morning they saw two staff cars drive in through the gate and five Japanese officers get out and go up to the superintendent's office. Shortly after this, one of the Japanese guards came to their room and read out the names of seventeen Karens. They were marched in file across the compound to the old schoolroom. The Japanese had erected a table across the room, behind which were seated a Japanese major (Major Shunji Koga), four other officers, and two interpreters. The Karens were made to stand in two lines facing the Japanese. Then Seagrim was brought in under guard and made to stand at the end of the line on the right. He was barefoot and bearded, still wearing Karen dress, with



hair and beard shaggy and unkempt. He was thin and had scabies on his legs and arms. But he was quite composed and he smiled at the Karens. Standing there at the end of the line, he seemed to tower over them.

Major Koga turned to Seagrim and said through one of the interpreters: 'Do you agree that we should pass sentence on you?'

Seagrim replied: 'I am a prisoner in your hands. I can have no objection.'

Major Koga then read out the sentence: 'The following are sentenced to death—Major Seagrim, Lieutenant Ba Gyaw, Saw He Be, Saw Tun Lin, Saw Sunny, Saw Pe, Saw Peter, Saw Ah Din. The following ten Karens are sentenced to eight years' rigorous imprisonment—Saw Po Hla, Saw Ta Roe, Saw Digay, Thra May Sha, Thra Kyaw Lay, Saw Rupert, Saw Henry, Saw Po Myin, Saw Tha Say, Saw Yay.'

It was translated into English and Karen.

Then Seagrim took a step forward and said: 'First you said that I would be treated honourably as a prisoner-of-war. Now you sentence me to death. I do not mind what you do to me. But I do ask you, if you are going to punish anyone, punish only me. Do not punish these Karens. It is only because of me that all these Karens have got into trouble. This war is between the Japanese and the British, not between the Japanese and the Karens. I beg you to release all these Karens here.'

Major Koga replied: 'I agree that this war is between the Japanese and the British. But the Karens have been helping the British and they too must be punished.'

He then signified that the proceedings were at an end. They were all marched out and taken to the cook-house and offered some rice. But no one wanted to eat. They were not allowed to talk. After a short while the ten Karens who had been sentenced to eight years' imprisonment were put into chains. Seagrim and the seven Karens who had been sentenced to death had their hands tied behind their backs and were marched off to a waiting truck. After Seagrim had climbed

into the truck, he shouted to the Karens who remained: 'Good-bye to you all.' A Karen who called back 'Good-bye' was slapped in the face by a guard. Some Japanese soldiers threw some shovels and picks on to the truck, climbed aboard it themselves, and the truck drove off through the gate. When Ta Roe last saw Seagrim, as the truck drove off, he was still, in Ta Roe's words, 'smiley-faced'.

They were taken to the Japanese execution ground at Kem-mendine cemetery. The cemetery is a rambling place with sections devoted to Christian, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu and Moslem burials. Just outside its entrance is a row of poor hovels where wooden coffins are sold—or rather re-sold, for it is the practice of these coffin dealers to dig up newly buried coffins by night and sell them again. The cemetery was not cared for during the war. Bushes, weeds, tall clumps of rank grass had been allowed to grow over the graves. In one corner was a row of brick ovens built by the Japanese for cremating their own dead.

Except for the Japanese who formed the firing squad there were no witnesses of Seagrim's death. These executions at Kem-mendine were carried out in great secrecy, in a corner of the cemetery screened by bushes and clumps of grass. Sentries were posted all round the cemetery and no one was allowed to come anywhere near it. Traffic on the road was halted for the morning and people living nearby were told to stay in their houses.

Beyond the facts that they were blindfolded, shot, and then buried in a common grave, we know nothing. But, knowing the character of Seagrim and his devoted Karen followers, we may be certain that they met their death bravely and betrayed no fear in those last moments. And, religious men that they all were, followers of another leader who had faced a barbarous death, we may conjecture that they died with a prayer in their hearts or some verse from the Bible on their lips. It may have been that verse which appears to have been a great source of strength to Seagrim in prison: 'If we die with Him, we shall also live with Him.'

## CHAPTER 13

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It is tempting to end the story of Seagrim here, with his death. What follows must inevitably be in the nature of an anti-climax. But, as emphasised earlier, the story of Seagrim and the history of the Karens during the past few years are inextricably intertwined. It is necessary to trace the subsequent fortunes of the Karens. Not for the first time in human history were the fruits of a man's work to ripen only after his death.

When Seagrim died he must have felt that he had achieved very little. The Japanese campaign to stamp out his organisation and the Karen resistance movement in the hills had, it must be frankly admitted, been completely successful. But it was only a temporary success. Seagrim would not have felt that he had achieved little if he had lived to see the great Karen revolt which took place a year later. It was the biggest irregular operation that took place in all South-East Asia Command. It was named, by a happy inspiration, Operation Character. Although in a military sense it was a completely new operation, it owed much to Seagrim and was indeed the actual development of his work in the hills.

After his surrender in March, 1944, and the arrest or surrender of nearly all the Karen leaders, there was a lull in the hills. Those Karens who had been taken to Rangoon and not sentenced were eventually allowed to return to their homes. For the next few months—and it was hardly surprising—the whole of Salween District was cowed. Meanwhile in India the British command had learned the sad news of the deaths of the three British officers and the uncovering of the organisation in the hills. It was realised that the next special

operation in the Karen country would have to be much more closely tied in with the regular military operations. Preparations went ahead against the day when that moment should arrive.

At the beginning of 1945 large British forces broke into the central plain of Burma. They had several hundred tanks with them and the same overwhelming degree of air superiority which the Japanese had enjoyed three years before. They had the measure of the Japanese, who had already, it was quite obvious, lost Burma. But the question of time was all-important. The south-west monsoon which starts towards the end of May turns all unsurfaced roads, especially those in the hills, into seas of mud. When he took Meiktila at the beginning of March, General Slim, the commander of 14th Army, had to take a tremendous decision. Should he play for safety, consolidate his forces in north Burma, and take Rangoon at the beginning of the next dry weather? Or should he go flat out for Rangoon and try to take it before the monsoon began in May? It was more than 300 miles to go and he had two months in which to do it. It would have to be fast going. If he made it, well and good. But if the Japanese should succeed in putting up an effective resistance in Lower Burma and 14th Army was caught down there by the monsoon, with that immensely long and vulnerable line of communication to India, it would indeed be in a pickle. It is not right to say that General Slim took a chance. He knew what that magnificent army of his could do; he had a shrewd idea of Japanese strength; he had fought over this same country in 1942. He decided to go for Rangoon. The target date was May 1. On that very day Gurkha paratroops landed at Elephant Point at the entrance to Rangoon river. The following day Rangoon was entered by troops of the 15th Indian Corps who had come by sea from Ramree Island.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The leading elements of 14th Army were held up by two days' rain just south of Pegu, and were not able to get down to Rangoon from Pegu until four days later. The 17th Indian Division, which will be remembered as fighting the Japanese in Tenasserim way back in 1941, was thus denied the privilege of being the first formation to re-enter the capital of Burma.

In this dash for Rangoon, there were two places on the north-south axis where the Japanese might be expected to make a stand. The first was Toungoo, 166 miles north of Rangoon, junction of the road leading up into the Shan States via Mawchi, Loikaw and Taunggyi. The second was Pegu, road and rail junction for their main supply line running east to Siam. Of these two points Toungoo was the more dangerous. There were three Japanese divisions in the Shan States. If they could bring even one division down the road to Toungoo in time to make a stand there, 14th Army might find itself in a very unpleasant position and might not be able to reach Rangoon on schedule. Therefore it became of urgent importance to try and delay the movement of Japanese reinforcements to Toungoo. British officers were already back in the Karen hills organising levies and this was given to them as their primary task. It was a curious reversal of history. In 1942 Karen troops and levies tried to stop the Japanese coming up the road from Toungoo into the Shan States, in 1945 *down* the road *to* Toungoo *from* the Shan States.

The officers in charge of special operations in Burma now had plenty of equipment to draw upon, their own flights of aircraft, thousand of modern firearms. Wireless operators were short, and there were never as many British officers available as could be used, but, even so, a steady flow of British and Karen volunteers, the majority drawn from various irregular units which had fought in Burma, parachuted into the Karen hills. A number of the British officers and N.C.O.s had fought with resistance movements in France, Italy, the Balkans. At one time the demand for British officers was so great that volunteers from the Mediterranean were put into the Karen hills after only three days in India.

It was a far cry to the old Oriental Mission days and the captured Italian rifles and the dud ammunition which were all that could be spared for Seagrim.

The first British officer to parachute into the Karen hills in 1945 was a certain Major R. G. Turrall of the Intelligence

Corps. He was over fifty, with an M.C. from the last war, a mining expert who had spent many years in Africa. He was a small, lean, hard man with a hatchet face, who always wore a hat about three sizes too big for him crammed down over his ears. He had been with Wingate in Abyssinia and also in Burma, a man of great endurance and almost fanatical courage. He landed near Pyagawpu on February 20, about eleven months after Seagrim's surrender at Mewado. He found the Karens in a very dubious mood, and during the first three days at Pyagawpu he obtained only four recruits. Then, on the nights of February 23 and 24, Lieutenant-Colonel E. H. Peacock landed with two Dakota-loads of British, Burmese and Karen parachutists. The arrival of these men immediately swung local Karen opinion. The Karens saw that the British really meant business and they proceeded to volunteer in considerable numbers. During his first week in the hills Peacock armed 250 mobile and 350 static levies.

Peacock's parties were originally intended to land at a dropping zone further north, but when they had arrived over it they had seen many lights, suggesting a Japanese encampment, and they had dropped at Pyagawpu instead. Their appointed sphere of operations was up on the Mawchi road and they soon moved up there. Peacock was a man of about fifty, a former Game Warden in Burma, who at the start of the war was farming in Rhodesia. One of his early British officer reinforcements was Bill Nimmo, who landed not far from where his brother had been ambushed and killed near Mawtudo.

About one month later another area was built up north of the Mawchi road under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel J. C. Tulloch, another man of fifty plus, who became something of a legendary figure in Burma. A small dapper man with a monocle and a carefully brushed up-turned moustache, he had done many remarkable things, including (so the legend went) eight years in Africa as a big-game hunter and a year in wartime Germany disguised as an Arab carpet-seller.

Amongst the Karens who served under Tulloch were many Padaungs. The husbands of the giraffe-necked women proved themselves to be first-rate fighters.

One of the Karens who dropped to Tulloch was an officer called Kan Choke who, in the original operation designed to establish contact with Seagrim, had been intended to take the part taken by Ba Gyaw. He was a regular soldier with twenty-eight years' service in the Burma Rifles, a substantive Subadar-Major holding the honorary rank of lieutenant. He had been awarded the Burma Gallantry Medal in the first Burma campaign and had accompanied Thompson, Nimmo and Ba Gyaw in their long trek out of Burma. Owing to trouble with his eyes he was not able to jump in to Seagrim in 1943 but he went on nine of those abortive missions to try to drop wireless equipment to Ba Gyaw, and he was a tremendous inspiration to the Karen boys in India. One of the staff officers in India says of him: 'When Character was launched and Tulloch was due to go in, Kan Choke came to me and pleaded to be allowed to go too—in order to kill some Japs and avenge Nimmo's death. I naturally hesitated as he had not been too fit, was then over fifty, and had only one eye. He was so importunate, however, that I finally acquiesced. To say his face lit up is to put it mildly. He went in to Tulloch and did extremely well. He was a most lovable character, with the very highest sense of duty.'

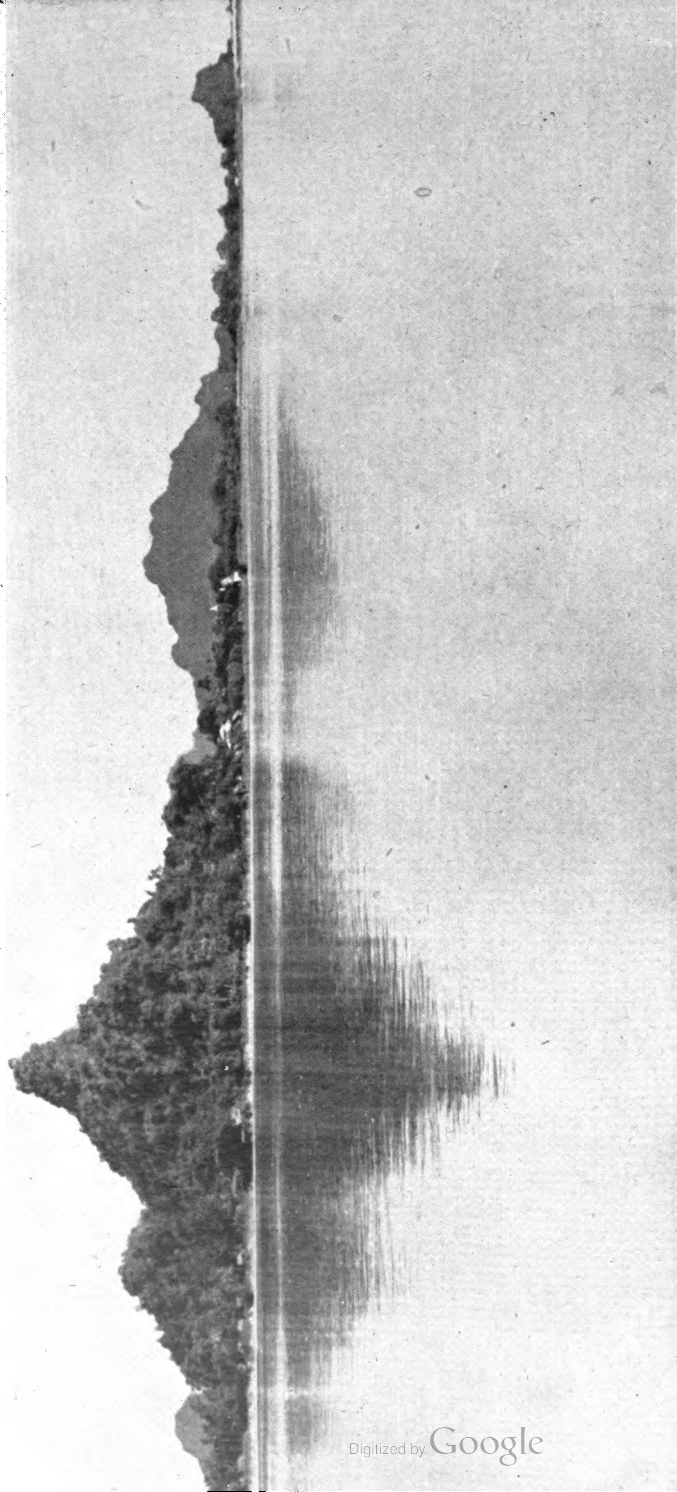
Peacock's second-in-command, Saw Butler, also did extremely well. Originally a schoolmaster in Toungoo, he had served for two years with the Northern Kachin Levies and had won the M.C. He was one of the most experienced of the Karen officers.

Operation Character was finally divided into four areas, Walrus, Otter, Hyena and Mongoose. Walrus, commanded by Tulloch, was the northernmost, its area lying north of the Mawchi road between Bawlake and Loikaw. Otter, commanded by Peacock, was responsible for both sides of the



19. Operation Character. A Lysander landing on an improvised strip in the Karen hills





20. The Salween where it flows through the Karen country

Mawchi road from the foot-hills near Toungoo to Bawlake. Hyena, commanded first by Turrall and then by Lieutenant-Colonel H. W. Howell (formerly with the Kailan Mining Administration in China), operated round Pyagawpu. Mon-goose, the last area to be formed, operated in the Papun-Shwegyin-Bilin area. It was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel R. A. Critchley, M.C., a regular soldier who had served in Abyssinia with Wingate.

The scale of Character may be gathered from the fact that more than eighty British officers and thirty British N.C.O.s (mostly wireless operators) went in by parachute and probably twice that number of Karens. By the time the war ended more than 12,000 Karens had been armed. The main function of the British officers and N.C.O.s was to train, plan, and lead the Karens into their first actions and show them how to do it. One of them wrote later: 'The Karens are not militarily aggressive and do not love war for its own sake. On the whole the villagers in my area were timid and given to panic when first taken into action. But once successful under competent officers, once shown how easy it was for well-armed parties to ambush the Japanese, their fighting spirit rose high. They produced their own leaders and displayed initiative and a spirit of attack. They took rapidly to explosives and used them a lot without accident to themselves.'

Walrus and Otter saw most action in the early stages, for they were sitting astride the Mawchi road. On April 13 they were sent word by 14th Army that the Japanese were beginning to send their 15th Division down from the Shan States. 14th Army was then at Pyinmana, so the chances in the race for Toungoo looked fairly even. But the Japanese were delayed for at least seven days by the attacks which Tulloch's and Peacock's levies made against them, by ambushes, road-blocks and demolitions. By the time the forward battalions of the 15th Division debouched from the hills into the plain, 14th Army had already taken Toungoo.

The Japanese position after the capture of Rangoon was that they had at least 20,000 men west of the Rangoon-Mandalay road and about 50,000 in the Shan States and north Karenni. Those in central Burma now tried to get east into Siam, those in the north tried to get south and then east, also into Siam. In either case they had to pass through the Karen country. From May onwards the levies were sitting on all the main Japanese escape routes from Burma, and all four areas, Walrus, Otter, Hyena and Mongoose, were involved in heavy and continuous action.

One of the outstanding kills was on the Shwegyin river where the local levy commander at one time had thirty Bren-gun teams lining twenty miles of the east bank. The Japanese fleeing east had to cross this river and either seized native craft or made rafts of bamboo. They were inevitably swept downstream by the strong current and thus had to pass at least one of the Bren-gun posts. In one week the levies claimed 900 Japanese and this was, if anything, an underestimate.

One of the bigger offensive actions by the Karens was an attack on the *Kempeitai* headquarters in Kyaukkysi on April 15, led by Turrall. The Karens captured the town, killed forty-one Japanese and rescued some Karens who were being held by the *Kempeitai*. Turrall was slightly wounded. The levies withdrew and left the town to be defended by a detachment of the Burma National Army, which had revolted against the Japanese and was now fighting on our side. On April 19 the Japanese re-entered the town, catching the young Burmans of the B.N.A. asleep and unprepared.

The capture of Kyaukkysi was one of the few occasions when the levies made a formal attack. For the most part they confined themselves to the setting of ambushes and the sniping of Japanese on the mountain tracks. The most effective type of ambush consisted of a length of cordtex up to 200 yards long with charges and grenades at ten-yard intervals. It would be set off by pulling a string when a large body of

Japanese were passing. The track for 200 yards—and any Japanese on or near it—would be blown sky-high. At the side of the track, when setting ambushes, the levies would plant sharpened bamboo stakes on which the Japanese impaled themselves when they dashed into the undergrowth.

Turrall also featured in what was probably the most widely publicised incident connected with the Character operation. On August 16 he walked into the Japanese lines to tell them that the war was over. He was promptly tied up by the Japanese and taken on a two-days' march to the south. They refused to believe that the war was over, but they had difficulty in contacting any senior officers. Their communications had broken down completely and all these units trying desperately to get eastwards into Siam were out of touch both with each other and with their higher formations. Although Turrall had an iron constitution, the strain of six months in the field under monsoon conditions was telling on him and he kept on having momentary black-outs. The Japanese slapped his face many times and took his boots from him. The Karen who had accompanied him into the Japanese lines was shot in the back one night. In fact Turrall did not think that he would get out of their hands alive. On August 21 he worked his ropes loose and made a dash for it. The Japanese guards chased him, caught him in the undergrowth and clubbed him about the head with their rifles. Eventually some pamphlets dropped by the R.A.F., giving the text of the Emperor's speech, with a note from Lieutenant-General Tucker, commanding 4 Corps, to say that Major Turrall was his personal representative, convinced the Japanese. They released him and Turrall regained the British lines near Kyaukkyi on August 24, having been in Japanese hands for a week.

A Japanese document which came into our possession after the surrender gives an interesting sidelight on the effect which all this Karen guerrilla activity had on the Japanese.

It is a report to his divisional commander by a Colonel Tsukada, commanding the 215th Infantry Regiment of the famous Japanese 33rd Division:

1. *In view of the manœuvres of our rear units, the country between Mawebi and Papun was vital. We had to pass through this country, which had natural advantages for guerrilla activities.*
2. *Sabotage troops proved very effective against small parties, rear units, walking wounded and sick.*
3. *The regiment took the utmost pains in disposing and protecting units, but sometimes it received guerrilla attacks which disordered the plan of marching and often halted all movement.*
4. *The guerrillas spread alarming reports which caused great uneasiness to our men, and their morale was badly depressed. The non-fighting troops in the rear felt terror with the sense of hopeless battle.*
5. *Round Kawkareik there were only military police and rear transport units. They were very uneasy to see sabotage troops falling down from the sky and guerrilla activities on the ground. Also there were great difficulties in purchasing and transporting supplies.*
6. *The sabotage troops had been so well trained over a considerable period of time and their activities were so skilful that we were unable to obtain successful results. Our lines of communication were cut, and, as their activities increased, we had to keep strong guards posted day and night which gave the men no time to rest.*

Operation Character exceeded all expectations. Apart from the delay imposed on the 15th Japanese Division which, it might be argued, had a decisive bearing on the Burma campaign, the Karen levies that summer of 1945 killed at least 12,500 Japanese and indirectly were responsible for the deaths of thousands more, through air attacks directed by levy officers. At the start of the operation the staff officers in India thought they would probably be able to raise 3,000

levies, possibly 5,000. But eventually they armed more than 12,000. The ratio of losses must have been one of the most uneven in the history of warfare. Otter, for example, killed more than 3,000 Japanese for the loss of thirty-four levies killed, Hyena more than 5,000 for the loss of thirty-five men. About half a dozen British officers and men lost their lives.

It is to be hoped that one of the men who fought in it will one day give us a detailed account of Character. This chapter is merely designed to give a brief indication of its size and scope, and to show that Seagrim's work in the hills was to produce, after his death, results much greater than he could have foreseen even in his most optimistic moments. It was Seagrim who gave the Karens sufficient faith in us to fight all out when the second round began. After what they went through in 1942, 1943 and 1944, it is doubtful if the Karens would have had the courage to get going again without the inspiration of Seagrim's work.

Peacock puts it well at the end of a report which he had to write on Otter. He says:

*'I have left to the last all mention of Major Seagrim who, although not directly concerned in this operation, was, at its inception, the focal point of all attempts to start a resistance movement in Karenni. This is not the place to tell his story; of how he "stayed put" in Burma and gave his life to save the Karens from persecutions on his behalf. But he was very definitely an inspiration to the Karens and to us all, and I like to think that his valourous spirit, and those of Major Nimmo and Captain McCrindle who were dropped to him and died in Karenni, were more than a little responsible for the loyalty and gallantry shown by these hillmen throughout the campaign.'*

One of the young officers who went in with Peacock, Captain D. D. Guthrie, who had parachuted into France on D-Day and worked with the Maquis before coming to Burma,

gave a talk over the B.B.C. after he returned to England. In it he told a little of his own experiences and gave in outline the story of Seagrim. Guthrie had the misfortune to break his ankle when he landed at Pyagawpu. The rest of the Otter party had to go north and Guthrie, quite unable to walk, was looked after by the headman of Chawido village, Saw Paw Doe. The Japanese were already on their way to Pyagawpu. They knew the British had dropped and that the Karens were helping them. The Karens throughout those hills, men, women and children, were leaving their villages and taking refuge in inaccessible parts of the forest. Saw Paw Doe never hesitated. 'We will do our best,' he said. Guthrie, and a British wireless operator, Sergeant Moore, who had burned his hand badly, spent many weeks hiding in the forest, with the Japanese all round them. For six weeks, he says, he and Moore never talked above a whisper. Once a Japanese patrol passed within fifteen yards of them. But every day Saw Paw Doe or one of his men brought them two handfuls of rice wrapped up in leaves or some curried vegetables in a hollow bamboo. Six times he and his men came in the middle of the night and moved Guthrie on a stretcher to another part of the forest because he was afraid the Japanese had seen their tracks. One day Paw Doe sent a note with the food, saying that the Japanese were on all their tracks and he did not know when he would be able to come again. The note ended: 'Be very careful. But, Captain, we will pray for you, so God will take care of you.'

After several months the levies succeeded in making a light-plane strip on some level ground several miles north of Pyagawpu, where Lysanders were able to land, bringing in arms, supplies and reinforcements, and taking casualties out. Guthrie and Moore were flown to Rangoon.

He concluded his talk by saying:

*'It takes two to make a quarrel, and it takes two to make a loyalty. And this loyalty of the Karens to the British cannot*

*be surpassed, even between Englishmen born and bred in England. On the one side, it is due to men like Seagrim; on the other, to the character of the Karen people who have never been seduced, by promises, by money or by threats, from what they hold to be right.'*



## EPILOGUE

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After Japan surrendered in August, 1945, fighting still continued for several weeks in the Karen hills between the levies and parties of Japanese who did not know, or refused to believe, that the war was over. The last action took place near Pyagawpu, thus fulfilling, in a strange manner, an old Karen prophecy that in a great war to be fought in the future the last battle would be fought at Pyagawpu.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, however, news of the surrender reached all these scattered Japanese units and they were soon concentrated in tens of thousands down on the Sittang-Kyaikto-Moulmein road. The engineers of the 17th Indian Division, together with a Japanese engineering battalion, set to work to give the Bilin-Papun road an all-weather surface before the 1946 monsoon began, so that Salween District should no longer be isolated during the rains as it used to be before the war. For a time there was danger of a serious famine in the hills, for Operation Character had unfortunately coincided with the period of the year during which the hill peoples plant and grow their rice. There was the same danger of famine in both the Chin and Kachin hills. The R.A.F. came to the rescue with splendid promptness and in all three of these hill areas large quantities of rice were dropped from transport aircraft in an extensive dropping operation known appropriately as Operation Hunger. It was carried out not without loss to the R.A.F. Several of the dropping zones were enclosed by hills and the weather in the hills, even in the dry season, is always tricky and uncertain. Three Dakotas were lost on one mission in the Kachin hills and a fourth plunged into the hills near Papun.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 4 on page 216.

Peoples and countries recover from the effects of war in proportion as their economies are simple or complex. Nothing could be simpler than the self-sufficient village economy of the hill Karens. When I travelled through the Karen hills in April and May, 1946, life was returning to normal with astonishing rapidity. The villagers were already back to their immemorial ways of life and there was little to indicate that Salween District had recently been a bitter battle-ground where several hundred Karens, several thousand Japanese and a handful of gallant British officers lie buried. The Karens who fought in Character had been handsomely rewarded and this indeed had given rise to the main problem in Salween District, inflation. Whereas before the war there was only about 300,000 rupees worth of money circulating or hoarded in the district, there was now ten times that amount. The Deputy Commissioner, Lieutenant-Colonel Edgar Jennings, of the Burma Police, and the Medical Officer, Captain Bhim Sain of the Burma Medical Service, were finding it difficult to obtain the labour wherewith to rebuild their shattered offices and were living in makeshift huts of bamboo. Cloth was scarce, as it was throughout the East, but the Karens were lucky in that they had been able to use the silk and cotton from the thousands of parachutes that dropped into their country. One saw many wonderful garments made of parachute cloth—shirts, sarongs, tunics, berets—and the women unwound the cords and used the threads for weaving.

The British Government has made a gift of a large sum of money to the hill peoples of Burma in token of appreciation of the services which they gave to the allied cause during the war. There is a provisional plan to use the Karen allocation in three ways. Firstly, to found three scholarships for Karens at Rangoon University. This will enable the Karens to play a greater part in running their own administration and will, it is hoped, ensure that their leaders are in close touch with the new generation of young Burmans. Secondly, to found a small forty-bed hospital called the Seagrim Memorial Hospital.

Improved medical facilities, especially a wider knowledge of simple hygiene, are the chief material requirement of the hill Karens today and the best gift that we can bestow upon them. In view of his own early desire to become a doctor, a hospital is also an appropriate memorial to Seagrim, one of which, we can be sure, he would approve. Thirdly, to establish, in conjunction with the hospital, a small model farm, which would not only provide food for the hospital but also help to propagate improved methods of agriculture amongst the people.

Both in Salween District and the Delta, as soon as Japanese authority was removed and before British authority could be properly established, communal trouble between the Burmans and the Karens again reared its ugly head, fortunately not on the same scale as in 1942. The central part of Salween District is of course pure Karen. It is only on the fringes that the two peoples are mixed. In March, 1946, when 200 well-armed Burmese dacoits, under the leadership of two members of the Anti-Fascist Organisation, attacked and looted the town of Kyaukkyi, they killed the Karen sub-inspector of police and two Karen constables, leaving the Burmese members of the police force unmolested. A month later another equally large and well-armed gang between Bilin and Kyaikto ambushed the Karen sub-inspector of Bilin and five Karen constables and killed the lot.

When I visited the Delta in July, 1945, there was widespread dacoity, much of it taking a communal form. In the first interregnum of 1942 it had been Burmese undesirables who had been to blame. In this second interregnum it seemed to be Karen undesirables who were giving much of the trouble. Karen leaders who admitted this regrettable state of affairs to me said that much of it was retaliation for what the Burmans had done to the Karens in 1942 and that four years of war had had a contaminating influence on many of their people. Although communal feeling was running high that summer, it did not flare up into communal warfare, and this

was due partly to the presence in the Delta of detachments of the Karen battalion of the B.D.A. In April, 1945, when the battalions of the B.D.A. marched out of Rangoon, ostensibly so that they could take up positions to fight side by side with the Japanese, in reality so that they could disperse and come over to the British side and fight against the Japanese, the Karen battalion was sent to the Delta. Well-armed, though ill-disciplined, this battalion acted as a deterrent to any major outbreaks of communal violence.

The most noticeable result of the war in the East has been that all the Asiatic peoples, winners, losers and spectators alike, have become more nationalistic, more politically conscious. The Karens have not escaped the epidemic. In the first two chapters something was said about the curious Zionism of the Karens. When Karens first entered Burmese politics, this Zionism began to take a more concrete form. In his book, *Burma and the Karens*, Sir San C. Po asks that the Karens should be given special rights in the Tenasserim division (of which Salween District forms a part), that in this division the entire administration should be by Karens under British supervision, and that Tenasserim should be recognised as a Karen country.

‘“Karen Country”,’ he goes on to say, ‘how inspiring it sounds! What thoughts, what manly feeling, what wonderful visions of the future the words conjure forth in the mind of a Karen.’ This idea has grown, and today the two main Karen bodies, the old Karen National Organisation and the more recently formed Karen Central Organisation (which formed part of the Anti-Fascist Organisation headed by Aung San and Than Tun), have put forward a demand for an autonomous Karen area. Karen proponents of this scheme argue that unless they have a place of their own somewhere they will never get a square deal from the more numerous and sharper-witted Burmese and that there will be a constant fear of a repetition of what happened in 1942. Nearly all of them want to remain under British protection and in the Empire. The Karens today

are undoubtedly more united than they were before the war. The forces making for Karen unity are stronger than those making for disunity. Karen fissiparousness is not temperamental, as in the case of the Burmese, but rather the aftermath of past history.

British policy for Burma is embodied in the White Paper issued shortly after the reoccupation of Rangoon. This policy provides for Burma to attain, stage by stage, to a status of full self-government. But it excludes, for the time being, the frontier areas, on the grounds that the hill peoples are at a much lower level of political development. Therefore, while Burmese Burma would become in two or three years' time a fully self-governing state, the frontier areas would continue, for a number of years, to be administered by a British administration responsible, not to a Burmese cabinet, but to a British Governor-General or High Commissioner in Rangoon.

Undoubtedly the best solution to Burma's constitutional problem would be the creation of a Federated States of Burma, the same concept as was embodied in the British Government's proposals for the future of India. It is indeed the obvious pattern for these plural Asiatic societies where men are divided by religion, as are the Hindus and Moslems, or by temperament, language and degree of political development, as are the Burmese and the hill peoples. Under such a Federation, the Chin, Kachin, Shan and Karen areas would enjoy a certain degree of local autonomy as regards education, religion, agriculture, customary law. But they would also participate, with representatives proportionate to their numbers, in a government at the centre, dealing with subjects such as defence, external relations, finance, communications and the like.

As part of the policy of developing local autonomy the Burma Frontier Administration is already building up a system of advisory councils. Such councils will gradually cease to be purely advisory and will acquire executive functions. In other words, the British Government rejects the

idea of a separate Karen state, 'Karenistan' as the British officials sometimes call it. But it also rejects the idea of the complete domination of Burma by the Burmese majority. Its goal is a united or federated Burma in which the interests of the minorities shall be properly safeguarded.

The clause in the White Paper excluding the frontier areas from the provisions relating to Burmese Burma has caused almost universal opposition from politically-minded Burmese. Their argument is that it represents a policy of Divide and Rule and that it will tend to widen instead of close the gulf that separates the Burmese and the hill peoples, a gulf that has become much wider during this war. In a letter to the Secretary of State for Burma, the former Burmese premier, U Saw, put it as follows: 'It is reasonable for the people of Burma to expect that when, after a period of tutelage under the British, they are to be restored to full self-government, their country should be returned to them intact and not dismembered.' These Burmans further point out, firstly, that, although the Karens are in a large majority in Salween District, they do not form a majority of the population in the Tenasserim division; secondly, that the frontier areas have always been, and presumably will be again, a charge on the revenues of Burmese Burma.

Such are the views, on the political future of the Karens, of the three main parties involved, the Karens themselves, the British and the Burmese.

My experience has been, in talking to Burmese leaders, that nearly all of the responsible ones are agreed on the necessity of granting a large measure of domestic autonomy to the hill peoples while at the same time bringing them into a federation or union of greater Burma. I have found amongst these men a genuine regret for the excesses of the B.I.A. in 1942 which did so much harm to Burmese-Karen relations, and an expressed desire to make a success of their relations with the hill peoples. It is obviously to the interest of the Burmese, both from the point of view of internal peace and

national security, that the peoples all round them should be satisfied and well-disposed instead of being enemies or allies of potential enemies. This fact should become ever clearer as the Burmese realise that the intentions of their two most powerful neighbours may not always be of the most peaceable. Responsibility for putting Burmese-Karen relations on to a sound basis rests primarily, although not solely, with the Burmese.

It remains to be seen whether the increasing pressure of political developments inside Burma allows the British Government's policy for the hill peoples to evolve gradually and peacefully. The overriding question in Burma and India and everywhere in these plural societies in Asia is whether 'minority problems' can be solved peacefully by tolerance and good-will, or whether they must be put to the arbitrament of armed conflict. 'Let them fight it out among themselves', say some who pride themselves on a fancied realism. But no one who has ever had personal experience of Asiatic races 'fighting it out among themselves', with the appalling suffering it can bring to ordinary people not directly involved (the actual combatants usually suffer the least), would ever recommend this as the best solution.

Burmans and Karens live in the same country. In the words of the Golden Book: 'they are members one of another'. Karen leaders, just as much as Burmese leaders, must face up to these facts and take as their touchstone: 'What makes for unity is good; what makes for separateness is bad.' They must overcome that traditional escapism which, when a quarrel breaks out in a Karen hill village, causes one of the two parties to go off and found a new village.

It is interesting to recall that when Peacock parachuted into Pyagawpu he took with him some trained Burmese guerrillas from the Chindwin country who had fought with him for many months in the Chin Hills. He reported that in spite of the hereditary antipathy between Burman and Karen, these young Burmans soon gained the confidence of the Karens

and were accepted as leaders of Karen levy sections. Another British officer who fought in Character and was on the fringes of the Karen country where the two peoples are mingled wrote later: 'There is much dislike between the Burmese and Karens, but there is also a strong tendency to exaggerate this feeling. My own experience in settling civil affairs showed clearly that they are perfectly capable of living together in peace and harmony provided the bad elements, which are nearly all Burmese and exist in any Burmese community, are kept under control.'

What Seagrim's views on this subject were I do not know. Some Karens once told him that after the war they were going to try and press for a separate Karen state and that they wanted him to be its first Governor. But I do not know what his reply was, and he certainly did not discuss this subject with Po Hla and some of his other closest followers. He wanted better schools for the Karens, better medical facilities, better roads, and he wanted the effort which they made during the war to be known to the world. He would doubtless have championed their cause after the war, but it is doubtful if he would have thought that this cause was best served by the artificial and unnatural creation of a small state.<sup>1</sup>

Before concluding this book, the reader will want to know what happened later to some of the men who featured prominently in the story and survived.

Father Calmon is back at his mission near Papun. After his arrest by the Japanese in 1943 he was for several weeks most brutally treated by the *Kempeitai*. In November of that year he was sent to Thaton and he spent the rest of the war interned there. After the Japanese surrender the British offered to fly him back to France, but his first thought was of his flock and as soon as he could he returned to Papun. His mission had been destroyed, but he scraped together some timber and

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 7, page 226.



corrugated iron and put up a temporary building where he looks after forty Karen orphans who have been bereft by the war. Colonel Jennings supplies him with rations for them all. He is badly in need of alms so that he can re-establish his mission properly and put up a permanent orphanage. He trudges indomitably about the country visiting the Catholic Karens, bare-footed like them, a cheerful person but pale through recurrent attacks of fever, with his deep-set eyes and bushy beard. His prestige with the Karens is very high, because he stayed with them and helped them in their troubles.

Po Hla was in a large party of prisoners from Insein gaol whom the Japanese decided to take eastwards with them when they evacuated Rangoon in the second half of April, 1945. He jumped from the train near Waw, escaped, and came into the British lines at Pegu early in May.

Ta Roe was released from prison when Rangoon was reoccupied. He was suffering badly from scabies, ringworm, dysentery and septic sores, and had to spend some time in hospital. He is now restored to his family at Pyagawpu.

Willie Saw was also in bad shape when released from prison and had to undergo an operation in hospital. He is now back at his old post of Forest Ranger at Kadaingti, much to the relief of his charming and intelligent wife.

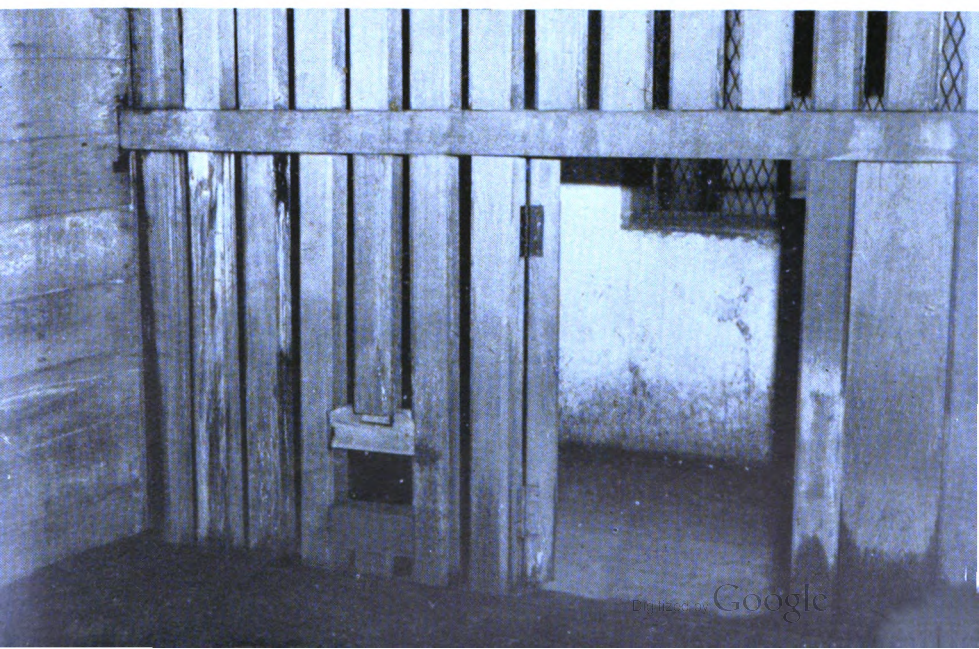
Darlington, along with the other Karens who were arrested and taken to Rangoon by the Japanese but not sentenced, returned to Salween District in July, 1944, and later took part in Operation Character. When Colonel Jennings arrived in Papun as Deputy Commissioner in October, 1945, he made Darlington his Township Officer for a time.

Digay and Po Myin, two of the Karens sentenced to eight years' rigorous imprisonment, escaped from the Japanese when working in a labour gang at Syriam and made their way back to the hills. Both fought in Character. Digay has returned to his timber contracting and Po Myin is once again Police Station Officer at Pyagawpu.



21. (a) The Japanese execution ground at Kemmendine cemetery. Most of the bushes and grass clumps have been cleared away but the outline of the deep trench which served as a common grave is clearly visible

(b) Inside one of the *Kempeitai* cells at the New Law Courts







22. (a) Agriculture in the Karen hills. Terraced rice-fields at Pyagawpu

(b) *Taungya* cultivation on the hillsides



Thra May Sha and Thra Kyaw Law, the two Karens who looked after Seagrim and Nimmo at Mawtudo, have returned to their pastoral duties on the Mawchi road and are collecting funds wherewith to rebuild their destroyed churches. Saw Rupert is back as headman of Bawgali village. The silver K rings, it is sad to relate, have not been a great success. They meant nothing to the returning British and Indian troops, whose first reaction was usually to see whether their owners would part with them in return for a tin of bully beef. The name Seagrim was unknown to the British troops.

Saw Tommer and Arthur Ta Bi, who in 1943 were appointed respectively D.C., Salween District, and Township Officer, Papun, are both back in administrative jobs. Saw Henry, who made the dropping zone for Seagrim in the Pegu Yomas and was later sentenced to eight years' imprisonment, also jumped from the train near Waw and escaped from the Japanese. He is now sub-inspector of police at a small town north of Pegu.

Thet Wa, Seagrim's wireless operator, was another of the Karens taken away by the Japanese when they evacuated Lower Burma. He not only escaped but also contrived to arrange for the ambushing of the Japanese in his party by Turrall's levies. He himself then joined them and fought with distinction. In May, when I last saw him, he was trying to obtain a post in the Burma Customs Service. Saw Aaron, Nimmo's wireless operator, was almost the only one of the Karen parachutists who contrived to retain his liberty in the hills. He was never captured by, nor surrendered to, the Japanese, and as soon as the first British officers dropped in for the Character operation he joined them. He was badly wounded when a Japanese bullet caused the magazine of his rifle to explode, but he survived, was evacuated to Rangoon, and, last May, was still at a hospital in Lucknow.

Those of Seagrim's followers who were simple villagers have returned to their *taungyas* and bamboo huts and small hill-side communities. Many of the younger ones have joined

the new Burma Army. In this new army there are four Burmese battalions mainly composed of officers and men from the Patriotic Burmese Forces (lineal descendant of the old B.I.A., through the B.D.A. and the B.N.A.). There are also two Karen battalions, two Chin battalions and two Kachin battalions. The old system of mixed battalions has had to be abandoned because, as a result of their experiences during the war, soldiers from the hill peoples will not serve under Burmese officers.

Aung San, who has appeared in these pages from time to time, was offered a senior post in this new Burma Army with the rank of brigadier, but turned it down so that he could devote himself to a political career. He is now president of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (lineal descendant, through the A.F.O. or Anti-Fascist Organisation, of the original Burmese underground resistance) and is Minister for Defence in the Governor's Executive Council. He is regarded by the people as a great national hero.

Captain Inoue was arrested by the War Crimes Investigation officers on charges of being responsible for brutalities against the Karens and is now, by one of those curious reversals of fortune, incarcerated in that same gaol to which his organisation sent so many men. There is no charge against him in connection with Seagrim, for the Japanese were legally within their rights in shooting a man, dressed as a civilian, who had been transmitting intelligence to India which had already caused the death of several hundred Japanese in air raids and much other damage besides. Inoue takes all these things quite philosophically and, as with all his countrymen, his discipline has held.

And Seagrim? Let the Karens themselves say what his memory means to them.

When Ta Roe was lying in hospital, he said to me, in that simple Biblical English of his: 'When I think about Seagrim, I always want to shed my tears. He said: "Ta Roe, when the British come back I shall look after you." He always called

me Ta Roe. When he wrote to me he would say: "Ta Roe, you may come to me." He loved me very much.

'We are poor people and we had no precious things to give him. I gave him my long pants, but he was very tall and they were too short for him.

'In the hills everybody knew him, even the small children. We used to call him Grandfather Longlegs. For you must know that when we talked secretly about the Japanese we called them Shortlegs, and when we talked secretly about the English we called them Longlegs.

'He once said to me: "Christ sacrificed for the world. I will sacrifice for the Karens."

'He was always smiley-faced. I saw him many times and he was never cross or angry, no, not once. He was always speaking sweet words.'

Willie Saw said of him: 'The Karens loved him. Of course. They knew that he came to save them. If it had not been for him we should all have been killed.'

And San Po Thin:

'He was a great chap. I think that if he had lived he would have gone even to the King of England about us Karens.'

Today Seagrim's body rests in the military cemetery at Rangoon, with, on either side of him, the bodies of the Karens who died with him. The white crosses are inscribed only with the names and the date of death. If ever an epitaph is required either for the grave or for the memorial hospital at Papun, there could be no more fitting words than those of the old Karen rifleman from the 3rd battalion who said: 'He loved the Karens.' But his true epitaph he has already inscribed himself, on something more durable than wood or brass, the hearts of a simple and steadfast people.



## APPENDICES





## APPENDIX 1

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### A NOTE ON THE DELTA KARENS DURING THE WAR

No account of Seagrim and the Karens would be complete without some mention of the Karens in the Delta. Not only is it one of the two main areas in Burma where the Karens are found in large numbers, but many of Seagrim's followers, Po Hla, for example, and nearly all the parachutists, came from the Delta, and he himself was in touch with the leaders of the Delta Karens. The story of the Delta is one of violence and crime, of heroism, brutality and secret intrigue, of the clash and inter-relationship of men of four races, British, Japanese, Burmese and Karen. Like Operation Character, it really deserves a book to itself instead of being relegated to an appendix.

At Bassein, the chief town of the Delta and the centre of the Delta Karens, the interregnum between the departure of British, and the establishment of Japanese, authority, was fortunately not characterised by any great violence, largely due to the personality and influence of Sir San Crombie Po, for many years the acknowledged leader of the Karens of Burma. Trained in America and England as a doctor, he had been the first and only Karen member of the old Legislative Council, and later, after the reforms, he had been the leader of the six Karens elected to the new Legislative Council. Before the last British officials evacuated Bassein on March 2, 1942, the Commissioner asked Sir San C. Po, now a venerable old gentleman of seventy-two with a white beard, to take over the temporary administration. The old man gallantly

shouldered this burden in the interests of his people, personally supervised the hospital and actually performed some operations with the aid of his daughter Winnie, also a doctor. The thirty police shot-guns he used to form a small Home Guard.

Everything went smoothly for two weeks. Then at the end of March a detachment of the B.I.A. arrived, commanded by an engineering student of Rangoon University who called himself Boh Win, with the politically minded son of a Bassein umbrella-maker as second-in-command. The first notification Sir San C. Po had of their arrival was a curt note: 'San C. Po, if you don't surrender all your arms and ammunition by four this evening, we shall take military action.' There was no 'Sir' or 'Dr.' or other polite form of address. The old man called the elders together and they unanimously decided to ignore this insulting communication. Some of the elders were in favour of attacking the B.I.A. then and there. That evening a message was conveyed orally to Boh Win saying that the Karen elders wanted to know by what authority the B.I.A. demanded arms and hinting that if there was any trouble the Karens were quite prepared to attack the Burmans. That evening the latter all drank heavily. The next morning Boh Win sent a message to Sir San C. Po asking him to come to their headquarters. The old man replied that on no account would he go to their headquarters but if they cared to come and see him he would be pleased to receive them. Eventually a compromise was reached and they met at an intermediary's house, half-way. The Burmans had stipulated that both parties should come to this meeting unarmed, and on arriving at the house the Karens were surprised to find the eight B.I.A. leaders armed to the teeth. 'Did you not agree', asked Sir San C. Po, 'to come unarmed to this meeting?' The young Burmans apologised, said it had been a mistake, and placed their arms on the table. Boh Win then said that he wanted the Karens to co-operate with him in the administration. Sir San C. Po said the Karens were willing to co-operate if they knew by what authority the B.I.A. was taking over the

administration. Boh Win laid a letter on the table. It was written in Japanese. 'That is the authority.'

'What does it say?' asked Sir San C. Po.

Boh Win had to admit that he did not know what it said, but he was quite sure that the Japanese had given him permission to take over the administration. There was some discussion and the Karens agreed, in the general interest, to co-operate with the B.I.A. in keeping order.

The B.I.A. behaved fairly well in Bassein. They looted a good deal, and shot three or four Indians suspected of crimes real or imaginary, but that was all. Less than two weeks later a detachment of the Japanese air force arrived under the command of a Major Yamada.

Their arrival was dramatic. It was known they were coming and the B.I.A. leaders came to await their arrival at Sir San C. Po's house outside the town. In the late afternoon a column of about 150 Japanese was seen approaching the town on foot, followed by several hundred Burmese hangers-on, most of them hoping for loot. Sir San C. Po went out to meet them, alone. At a distance of 200 yards Major Yamada halted the column and ordered his men to load their rifles. There was much rattling of bolts and Sir San C. Po became a trifle apprehensive. Then he remembered a gesture that he had first learned in the States from a fellow-student called Takaki who later became a professor at Tokyo University. Takaki had said that there was one gesture known throughout the East—to raise the arm and beckon with the hand. It was an international gesture of welcome and friendliness. This the old man did. After a pause the Japanese advanced. Sir San C. Po said in English: 'Why do you hesitate to come into this village?' Through an interpreter Major Yamada replied: 'We hear there are 800 soldiers with 400 guns waiting for us here.' Sir San C. Po assured them it was not true. Then the B.I.A. leaders came up and asked Sir San C. Po to introduce them to the Japanese. The meeting passed off satisfactorily and they all went into Bassein together.

At the end of May a regular Japanese garrison arrived. Many of the B.I.A. had already begun to trickle back to their villages. Those more intent on following a military career were recalled to Rangoon. Life in Bassein gradually returned to normal. The Japanese installed themselves, took over some of the government and mission buildings, and their soldiers behaved in an orderly and disciplined manner. Bassein, however, was lucky. The other large town of the Delta, Myaungmya, forty miles east of Bassein, had a very different story to tell.

After the Deputy Commissioner evacuated Myaungmya on March 1, a self-appointed committee of three young Burmans, all in their early twenties, took over the administration. Their first action was a trifle unfortunate. They released over a thousand criminals from the gaol, saying that they could neither feed them nor take responsibility for them. Almost at once Burmese criminal elements started looting houses and property belonging to Karens, Chinese and Indians. On March 5 an advance detachment of the B.I.A. arrived from Wakema, about twenty-five Burmans armed with *dabs*, led by a yellow-robed Buddhist monk carrying a *dab* and a double-barrelled shot-gun. The main body of the B.I.A. arrived the following day. They were led by one Boh Aung, a Thakin who previously had been organising a Thakin underground movement in Myaungmya, with, as his second-in-command, a science student from Rangoon University called Boh Myint. Like those B.I.A. who arrived at Papun in Salween District, they were an undisciplined rabble mainly composed of young men out for excitement and riff-raff out for loot.

Tension rose at once. The Burmans painted their slogans and emblems on all the government buildings, collected all the police and other arms which had been left for the protection of the town, and began to collect money for the B.I.A. They confiscated money from government servants, who had been given six months' pay in advance when the British left.

They insisted on all notes being stamped and would not permit an individual to keep more than 200 rupees. They made a lot of money by the forced sale of paper flags bearing the peacock flag which had to be displayed outside houses. In fact the opportunities for personal gain for a member of the B.I.A. were almost unlimited. They also started to try and recover all arms in the district and to round up ex-soldiers of the British Army. All the latter, of course, were Karens. The Karens became thoroughly frightened. The Karen quarters were searched for arms, during which the Burmans helped themselves to anything they fancied. Two Karens were bayoneted in public in front of the B.I.A. headquarters, one allegedly for rape, one for theft, and the bodies then hacked into small pieces. Under the circumstances it was hardly surprising that Karen villagers who did have arms did not surrender them.

By March 16 the B.I.A. were training and drilling recruits on the football field. By the end of that month there was a state of communal warfare throughout Myaungmya district. The B.I.A. burned down Karen villages. The Karens, in retaliation, attacked the B.I.A. and burned down Burmese villages. Every day thin columns of smoke on the horizon showed where more villages were being burnt. The hapless victims sought refuge in patches of forest or temporary shelters. It is not necessary to chronicle in detail the innumerable clashes which took place all over the district at that time. That ugliest of human phenomena, communal warfare, between communities who normally lived peaceably together, was in full blast. There is absolutely no doubt that initial responsibility lay, as it did in Salween District, with irresponsible and criminal elements in the B.I.A. But, once a state of warfare had been precipitated by these elements, each side attacked the other as and when it could.

Several Karen leaders, the *natural* leaders who emerge in times of crisis, formed large bands for the protection of their villages. Chief of these in Myaungmya was a certain Shwe Tun Gya. (His name in Burmese means Famous Golden

Lotus, but *Gya*, if pronounced slightly differently, means Tiger, and he preferred this reading. He was soon known throughout Lower Burma as the Tiger of the Delta.) In Bassein district a Karen called San Po Thin had formed a band called the Taw-mei-pa Association, after the legendary hero of the Karens. In May the Tiger wrote to San Po Thin saying that, such were the oppressions of the B.I.A., he was planning to attack them in their stronghold at Myaungmya. San Po Thin at once offered to come and help. 'Better to die', he replied, 'than live in shame.' About May 23 San Po Thin and 200 followers, armed with twelve shot-guns, five rifles, spears, cross-bows and staves, went over into Myaungmya district. The council of war with the Tiger and his lieutenants was held in a village headman's house and opened (although the Tiger was a devout Buddhist) with prayers by the Karen pastor who took as his text a verse from Philippians: 'I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.'

The attack on Myaungmya, launched on the morning of May 26, was, it must be frankly admitted, a complete failure, although it had been well planned. The Karens early on expended their meagre store of ammunition and, after one of their number was killed, retreated into the country. The result inside Myaungmya was disastrous. The B.I.A. panicked. First they went to the Roman Catholic Mission compound, from which direction there had been a certain amount of firing, and there they proceeded to massacre 152 men, women and children in cold blood, nearly all of them Karen, Anglo-Burman and Anglo-Indian refugees. Father Blasius, the Karen priest in charge, was sick in the clergy-house. The Burmans set fire to the house and burned him and the two men who were looking after him. They then burned down the church, first removing the surplices and chalice. At the orphanage another Karen priest, Father Pascal, came out on to the veranda and said there were only girls inside. The Burmans shot him in the stomach. The girls took refuge upstairs. The

Burmans shot up through the ceiling. There was wild shrieking. When certain there were no armed men upstairs, some Burmans went up and cut down the girls with *dabs*. Another Karen priest, Father Gaspar, was killed from behind with an axe. Four Karen lay sisters were killed. The great majority of the girls were cut down inside the mission compound, some on the road outside. The youngest victim was a baby of six months. Only about half a dozen children escaped. The remaining buildings were then razed to the ground.

The roused blood-lust of these hysterical Burmans was not sated by this orgy. They went in a mass to the other Karen quarter, Shwe Dah-gon, on the other side of the town. Here they killed another fifty-two people, all Karens, men, women and children. Amongst those killed was an old pensioner of eighty with his family of eight; a former Minister of Forests in the Burma government, Saw Pe Tha, his English wife, and three of their four children; a Karen policeman, and his pregnant wife who had just begun her labour.

Those Karens in Myaungmya who escaped these two massacres were then concentrated, in conditions quite as bad as ever prevailed in *Kempeitai* cells, in the town gaol. A few days later forty-seven Karen men were taken out and bayoneted to death. So were about fifty Indians, for the Indians, in this communal war in the Delta, had thrown in their lot with the Karens.

It was only when the Japanese arrived that order began to return. On June 14 the Karens were released from gaol. First the women and children were brought out, and then the men, who had been kept separately. The women realised that many of their menfolk were absent. Gradually the truth dawned on them and they began to weep. The Karens were all assembled and first a B.I.A. leader and then Boh Mo Gyo<sup>1</sup> made speeches exhorting the Karens, like little children, to be good and behave themselves. But the Karens hardly heard a word of

<sup>1</sup> Colonel Suzuki. See page 65 (Chapter 5) and page 220 (Appendix 5).



the speeches. They were weeping in their great sorrow and in the knowledge of their loss.

Although there were few further outbreaks of violence, a state of tension persisted all through 1942 and 1943, and only in 1944 did things begin to return to normal. The Burmans quickly forgot this communal war. Not so the Karens.

Two Karens who co-operated with the Japanese in maintaining peace between the Karens and the Burmese were the two Karen leaders already referred to, the Tiger and San Po Thin. Both were interesting characters.

The Tiger was in his early thirties, headman of a village near Ei-me. He was chiefly known to the Karens for two things, his prowess with women and his passion for Buddhist charms and talismans. He had, according to current report, several wives, not only Karen, but Burmese and Chinese as well, and numerous paramours in surrounding villages. He was actually on his way to Myaungmya in connection with this case when the British evacuated. At once, when the trouble started, he gathered men about him and, by sheer force of personality, became the acknowledged leader of the Karens in Myaungmya district. He seems to have been a generous and kind-hearted person and he looked after thousands of refugees, Karen, Indian, and Chinese. He had been tattooed all over his body by a famous Buddhist Karen monk called Pu Ya Li with magic squares, formulas, mystical arrangements of numbers. Of the large pig tattooed on his back, he used to say: 'If you have a pig on your back the *nats* (spirits) will look after you.' When he went into action he wore a belt of human hair with part of a human skull over his navel, to confer invulnerability. He also kept two small metal balls in his mouth, one of silver, one of gold. These were intended to confer the arts of smooth speech.

San Po Thin was a bit older. He was born in a village near Bassein in 1903, son of a prosperous Karen land-owner. His mother at birth gave him the names San Po in the hope that he would display some of the qualities of the distinguished

Karen leader mentioned earlier in this chapter. After going to the American Baptist Mission school in Bassein he spent several years in America studying music. For a time he went on tour with the Barnum and Bailey-Ringling Brothers Circus giving lectures on the famous white elephant (previously exhibited at the London Zoo) belonging to his relative, Dr. Po Myin of Toungoo.<sup>1</sup> Returning to Burma he taught music for seven years in A.B.M. schools and then became principal of the A.B.M. school in Meiktila, which was then heavily in debt. He put it on a sound financial basis by starting a highly successful school toy-making industry. Dr. Ba Maw, then premier, was so impressed that he gave San Po Thin a state scholarship and sent him to study in England for three years at the L.C.C. Central School of Arts and Crafts with a view to his starting a school of Arts and Crafts in Rangoon. Owing to the war this scheme was abandoned and for a time he returned to his farm and his family. He had four daughters, Rose and Ruth (twins), Esther, Yuki, and a small son called Too Too Baw. (The name Yuki, which in Japanese means Snow, had been bestowed, after seeing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, by a Japanese woman doctor of Bassein, Mrs. Kimura, who had delivered the child. Too Too Baw in Karen means Yellow-Gold.) In 1940 San Po Thin joined the Burma Army Service Corps and served in the early stages of the Burma campaign on the Tenasserim coast. When his unit was disbanded he returned to his home in the Delta and, foreseeing certain trouble between the Burmese and the Karens, formed the Taw-mei-pa Association. San Po Thin was a big-hearted, emotional Karen, devoted to his people and to the British cause, with the same natural gifts of leadership as Shwe Tun Gya, his chief fault being his impetuosity.

<sup>1</sup> In Burma and Siam white elephants are regarded as sacred because of the old tradition that one day the Buddha will return to earth riding on a white elephant. The unusual lateness of the 1928 monsoon was attributed to Dr. Po Myin's elephant having left the shores of Burma. The Burmese recalled that on the last occasion when a white elephant was taken away to another country drought and famine followed and lasted until the animal was brought back.

The following story may be told to illustrate this characteristic of San Po Thin's. Once, when he was at Bassein, he heard the noise of a large formation of aeroplanes approaching. He dashed out and, on a sandy shoal near the river-bank, hastily wrote out the words **WE KARENS WANT ARMS**. Only when the aeroplanes were directly overhead did it occur to him that they might be Japanese—which they were. Fortunately none of the Japanese pilots seem to have been able to read English.

The two men met before the attack on Myaungmya. They met again in October of that year. The Tiger arrived unexpectedly one evening at San Po Thin's village. His wife prepared dinner and they ate a hearty meal. Before eating, the Tiger removed the two small balls from his mouth. After the meal was over he put them back. Then they all went to the village church for a concert. It is worth giving the programme of this concert to illustrate the type of entertainment which these little Karen villages can put on at a moment's notice for visitors.

It opened with a prayer by the pastor. Then San Po Thin made a speech of welcome and the Tiger replied. The concert began with the village choir singing in harmony a Karen national song. A small orchestra of violins, guitars, Hawaiian guitars and ukuleles played a selection of Hawaiian music. A young boy with a particularly pleasing voice sang a song in Burmese. The women's chorus, in Karen dress, sang an old Karen song telling how the Golden Book would come back to the Karens after many centuries. San Po Thin sang, in English, 'Laugh, Clown, Laugh'. The children's chorus sang a Karen patriotic song. Two young boys—Willie and Godwin—sang in harmony an old Karen love-song. The village choir sang 'Come away, come away' in a Karen translation. The children put on a little play, a version of *Snow White*. Then the entire company sang a Karen hymn—'God is our helper'—and finished with the Karen national anthem. The Tiger was delighted. Before going to bed he talked with San

Po Thin for a long time about his activities in Myaungmya district. In the morning he returned. Before going, however, he sent down into the village to buy some clothes and blankets for the numerous refugees he was looking after in his own village.

Rumours of Seagrim's presence in the hills reached San Po Thin during the latter part of 1942. The Taw-mei-pa Association was still very short of arms and he thought that he might be able to obtain some from Seagrim. He sent a man up into the hills who contacted Seagrim and returned to Bassein bringing five rifles and some ammunition and accompanied by one of Seagrim's followers. The latter now took a much larger party of Delta Karens up into the hills, some twenty men in all. Seagrim gave them some rifles and shot-guns and they returned with them safely. He also gave them four letters written in pencil to be handed to San Po Thin. One was for San Po Thin himself; one for the Tiger; one for Major Kya Doe, a Sandhurst-trained Karen officer, formerly second-in-command of one of the battalions of the Burma Rifles, now living inconspicuously in Rangoon; one was addressed to G.H.Q. India, and San Po Thin was requested to forward it to India if he could.

Seagrim's letter to San Po Thin was ten pages long. It told how he had stayed behind in the hills and how he had organised his levies all through Salween District. He had nearly 1,000 men waiting for the return of the British. He described the way in which the B.I.A. had behaved in Papun and the action which the levies had taken against them. He told about the Karen girls who had been made to act as prostitutes. It was a deed of shame, he said, which he could never forget or forgive. The levies had some arms but were running short of ammunition. Many of the villages were short of food, and some of the levies, he said, were being naughty about using the guns and ammunition he gave them for shooting game in the forests. He was sending some arms to the Delta, as many as he could spare, but they were to be used only for the protection of the Karen villages, not on any account

against the Japanese. Not yet, anyway. The Karens were to get ready, but not to strike until they saw the British or received orders from the British. He did not want the Karens to be involved in useless suffering. The British would return soon, he was convinced, but the time was not yet ripe. For the present they must be patient and have faith.

He told San Po Thin how amazingly good the hill Karens had been to him. He himself was so used to being with Karens, living with them, eating with them, working with them, that he almost felt he had become a Karen himself. He loved them so much he would willingly give his life for them. If he survived the war, he would tell the whole world about the loyalty of the Karens. All the world knew about the Gurkhas. Nobody knew who the Karens were. He wanted the Karens to be as well-known as the Gurkhas. San Po Thin was to tell the Karen ex-soldiers of the Burma Rifles that they were not to worry. After the war he would look after their interests. The letter concluded with many texts taken from the Bible, comforting the Delta Karens in their sufferings and urging them to be of good heart and to help one another. God would deliver them from the hand of the Japanese. In the meantime it was the duty of all of them to keep alive and trust in God and pray to Him. He would surely help them.

‘It was a very moving letter,’ says San Po Thin. ‘I wish I could remember all of it. I wanted to keep it. But I was afraid that it might fall into the hands of the Japanese and so I burned it.’ The letters to the Tiger and Kya Doe he forwarded by trusted messengers. That to G.H.Q. India he buried until such time as he had an opportunity of forwarding it.

At the end of the rains of 1942 some Karen parachutists were dropped in the Delta and from that time onwards they were dropped at regular intervals. Amongst them was a young Burman working for the British who was hidden for several weeks by San Po Thin. ‘He could not have been in a safer place than in my house,’ says San Po Thin. ‘The *Kempeitai* would never dream that a Karen would harbour a Burman.’

The young Burman was a bit frightened and wanted to return to India. San Po Thin thought it an opportune means of sending on Seagrim's letter. He called down a Karen hunter from the Arakan forests whom he knew and told him to guide the Burman to the British lines in the Arakan. They set off, the Burman, the hunter, and a friend of the hunter, three of them, with the letter cunningly rolled up inside a bamboo walking-stick. But for some reason they were not able to make their way through the hills. They returned and stayed with San Po Thin for a few days. The hunter's friend liked to drink country spirits in the village and when drunk he became garrulous and indiscreet. Twice he nearly gave the show away, so two members of the Taw-mei-pa Association waylaid him one night, cut him down with *dabs* and hid the body. The young Burman went into hiding in a village on the Arakan coast.

About this time the Japanese started a big drive to round up the parachutists. San Po Thin felt that Seagrim's letter was too dangerous a document to keep, even hidden in the ground, and he burned it. For both he and the Tiger were playing a double game. On the surface they were co-operating with the Japanese, rounding up genuine dacoits, making speeches in the villages urging the Karens to co-operate both with the Burmese and the Japanese. (The Tiger, it will be remembered, went on a special mission for the Burmese government to Salween District.) Secretly they were both harbouring Karen parachutists and giving every assistance to them. It was too delicate a game to play successfully for very long, with an organisation as efficient as the *Kempeitai* and people as little security-minded as the Karens. The Tiger was eventually arrested. At the time of his arrest he was looking after four parachutists with transmitters in his house. Amongst his papers was found a Karen translation of Seagrim's letter. The Japanese took him to Henzada and there put him to death, by what means is not known.

The Tiger had also played a part in harbouring two British

soldiers who had been cut off during the 1942 campaign. One of them was wounded fighting with the Tiger's men against the B.I.A. They were passed from Karen village to Karen village, and for a long time were looked after by a Karen pastor, Thra Boydo. Rumours of the presence of these two white men in the Delta reached the ears of the *Kempeitai* in Bassein and many Karens were arrested and tortured to betray their whereabouts. But the Karens never talked. The villagers, their women too, did not flinch from the dangers of looking after these two Englishmen. It was not until October, 1943, that the Karens were finally forced into surrendering them. Thra Boydo was sentenced to eight years' rigorous imprisonment. A Karen village headman, who subsequently died in prison, was sentenced to four years. Four other Karens, of whom one died in prison, were sentenced to two years. The two Englishmen were taken to Rangoon and released at the time of the capture of Rangoon.

San Po Thin was suspected of complicity in all these affairs and for some time was held by the *Kempeitai* in Bassein. But he managed to talk his way out. The Delta, however, was becoming a little too hot for him and early in 1943 he went to Rangoon, partly to avoid the Delta, partly to see for himself what this new Burmese Independence, conferred by the Japanese with a great fanfare of trumpets, really amounted to. In Rangoon he went along to see a young Burmese nationalist whom he had first come to know in 1936, a henchman of Aung San's. He asked the Burman what he thought of this independence. The Burman said he did not think much of it. In fact, he said, he did not want to continue living in Burma if the Japanese were going to rule it. He would sooner go to live in India or America. The Japanese were devouring the country like a plague of locusts. He'd sooner have the British any day than the Japanese. The Burman took San Po Thin along to see Than Tun, then Minister for Commodities and Transport in Dr. Ba Maw's government. Than Tun also said that he was far from satisfied with the sort of 'independence' Burma now

enjoyed. He said that he would arrange for San Po Thin to meet Aung San.

That evening there was a dinner-party at Aung San's house. In addition to Aung San and San Po Thin there were present Boh Nay Win, then commander of the Burma Defence Army (Aung San having become Minister for Defence in Dr. Ba Maw's government), Boh Set Kya (or Aung Than), who later became Burmese military attaché in Tokyo, and Than Tun. During the early part of the evening conversation was general. San Po Thin could see that the four Burmans were trying to sum him up, wondering how far he could be trusted. After dinner their tongues loosened somewhat and Aung San hinted that if the war was going to end and Burma was going to get true independence there would have to be some sort of movement inside the country. They all knew what he was driving at. San Po Thin then put his cards on the table and said that he wanted to join them. He asked Aung San if he could give him a job in the B.D.A. Aung San said that he could give him a chair and a desk but he could not give him any work. He did not have any work himself. San Po Thin told them that they ought to enlist the services of Kya Doe, an experienced professional soldier, trained at Sandhurst. Kya Doe could probably be of great assistance to them. San Po Thin, at the Burmans' request, promised to contact him in the morning.

The next morning he went round to the Karen quarter in Kemmendine. Kya Doe was living in poverty, doing odd jobs, constantly suspected by the *Kempeitai*. It was a sad come-down for a former major in the British Army.

Kya Doe was pleased to see San Po Thin, whom he always used to call Sam. They had formed the habit of talking in English when together.

Kya Doe said he wanted to contact some of the Delta Karens and try to organise a small guerrilla force amongst the Karens in Bassein district that would help the British when they returned.



'I can make you a better proposition,' said San Po Thin, 'something on a much bigger scale.'

'What is that?'

'Join the B.D.A.'

Kya Doe looked at him in amazement. 'Do you think I'd join the bloody Jap army?'

'Don't be silly, Kya Doe. This is the Burma army, run by Burmese.'

Kya Doe looked at San Po Thin scathingly. 'Sam, Sam,' he said, misquoting the poet, 'pick up your rifle. Nothing doing.'

'Listen,' said San Po Thin. 'These fellows are planning to organise a rebellion against the Japanese. They want you to co-operate.'

'What?' said Kya Doe. 'Do you expect me to swallow that?'

'Aung San wants to see you. It won't cost you anything just to go along and see him in his office.'

'Nothing doing. I'm not going.'

'Don't be obstinate, Kya Doe. Look at the way you're living. You're carrying wood like a coolie. The Japs are after you all the time. If you join the B.D.A. you'll get protection. You'll get some pay. Your wife won't have to work like a drudge.'

At last Kya Doe yielded to San Po Thin's blandishments and the two of them went along to see Aung San in his office. They asked Aung San what he thought of the new independence. By way of reply Aung San crossed his wrists. 'But our feet are not tied,' he said. 'We are still free to walk about.' After that they talked about military matters and Aung San soon saw that Kya Doe was a professional soldier who knew his job.

That evening there was another dinner-party and Aung San asked Kya Doe to join them. He would make him a major in the organisation bureau of the B.D.A. But Kya Doe was still determined not to join them. As a way of getting out of it he said that he would join them if they made him a lieutenant-colonel. No Karen, he felt quite sure, would ever be made a

colonel in the B.D.A. The dinner-party ended on an inconclusive note.

The next morning the tenacious San Po Thin went round to see Than Tun and said to him: 'Why not make Kya Doe a colonel? After all, what *is* a colonel? You needn't bother about me. I'm quite content to go in as a lieutenant.'

Than Tun pushed the matter through and on September 26 it was announced in the government gazette that Kya Doe was now a colonel and San Po Thin a captain in the B.D.A. San Po Thin was considerably more elated over the success of his wiles than was Kya Doe at having been manoeuvred into the B.D.A. They were given 1,000 Japanese rupees to purchase uniforms and then started work at the B.D.A. headquarters. They sat at desks in the same room wearing their Japanese-style tunics, high brown jack-boots and Japanese-style swords, made locally in Rangoon, with the 150 Japanese officers and N.C.O.s who were attached to B.D.A. headquarters as 'advisers'. Kya Doe translated some British Army manuals into Burmese.

Now San Po Thin was on close terms with Boh Set Kya, one of the original thirty young Burmans trained in Japan. One night Boh Set Kya invited San Po Thin to his house and told him about the secret resistance movement which was then being formed. Boh Set Kya said he was fed up with things in Burma. Even if Burma had the status she had in British times under the 1935 constitution, it would be preferable to what she had now. He himself wanted to go to India. He had heard rumours that British agents had been dropped in the Delta. He wanted San Po Thin to go to Bassein, contact some of these agents and arrange for him to go to India. San Po Thin said he would do this.

Before he left for Bassein, he had a meeting with Saw Po Hla who had just come down from Seagrim's headquarters in the Karen hills. Po Hla had once been a music pupil of San Po Thin's in Bassein and they had also known each other when training at Mandalay in 1940. Po Hla was staying in

the Karen quarter at Insein and he sent a message asking San Po Thin and Kya Doe to breakfast. The two of them went and at breakfast they told Po Hla about the preparations that were being made inside the B.D.A. for a rising against the Japanese. Po Hla took them into his confidence about Seagrim's organisation in the hills and said that Seagrim was certain to be very pleased with this news. They did not yet have wireless communication with India but hoped to have it very soon.

Shortly after this meeting, San Po Thin, Po Hla and Boh Set Kya all came under suspicion. It is not clear how the *Kempeitai* got wind of these meetings and plottings. They had their spies and informers everywhere. They tried to arrest Boh Set Kya. Major-General Sawamoto, senior Japanese adviser to the B.D.A., told Aung San that Boh Set Kya was plotting against the Japanese. Aung San protested strongly against the proposed arrest. As a compromise Boh Set Kya was appointed military attaché in Japan and packed off to Tokyo where the Japanese could keep close watch on him.

San Po Thin had hardly arrived at Bassein before he was recalled to Rangoon and arrested by the *Kempeitai*. He managed to get word to Po Hla, who immediately fled north, with the Japanese, as has been told already, on his trail. For the next few weeks San Po Thin was kept under arrest, first in Rangoon and then in Bassein. Although not actually tortured, he was subjected to many long grillings and he himself was quite convinced the Japanese were going to kill him. But in October, unexpectedly, he was released and allowed to live at his village on condition that he reported to *Kempeitai* headquarters once a week. He had to go through the motions of co-operating with the Japanese. True dacoits who were troubling the people he had no scruples in helping to round up, but agents and political suspects he always tried to warn before any search for them began. 'Life in those days', he says, 'was horrible.'

Meanwhile in Rangoon Aung San was doing his best to

persuade the Japanese to allow San Po Thin to return to the B.D.A. as they were in process of forming an all-Karen battalion. At last permission was granted and towards the end of March, 1944, San Po Thin returned to Rangoon. His orders were to report to the head of the Rangoon *Kempeitai*, Colonel Suniyoshi.

Suniyoshi told him, during the course of their interview, that 'the father of the Karens' had been captured. San Po Thin asked whom he meant by 'the father of the Karens'. Suniyoshi replied that it was a British officer, a certain Major Seagrim.

At a later date Suniyoshi, who had been a prefectural police chief in Japan and had written the standard work in Japanese on finger-printing, told a small gathering of Karens in Bassein that he had been deeply impressed by Seagrim's character because Seagrim, after his arrest, had told Suniyoshi that he was willing to bear any punishment if only the Karens were released. 'I have never', said Suniyoshi, 'come across a finer gentleman.'

San Po Thin stayed with the B.D.A. and went with the Karen battalion to the Delta in the spring of 1945. He rounded up many Japanese and helped to preserve order in Bassein District. In June, 1945, he came to Rangoon with the brass band of the Taw-mei-pa Association, trained by him, which gave several concerts for the British troops. On returning to Bassein he was appointed Custodian of Enemy Property.

Kya Doe was one of the Karens whom the Japanese considered sufficiently important to take away with them when they evacuated Lower Burma. There were persistent rumours in Rangoon that he had been beheaded, but he and his wife succeeded in escaping from the Japanese near Moulmein. At the time of writing he is in command of one of the training centres of the new Burma Army.

## APPENDIX 2

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### THE ADVENTURES OF CORPORAL RAS PAGANI, 18TH BATTALION, RECONNAISSANCE CORPS, FORMERLY PRIVATE IN THE 1ST BATTALION, EAST SURREY REGIMENT

(The Karens were so positive that Pagani was dead that I did not bother to make any enquiries about him when I was in England in June, 1946. However, with the assistance of Seagrim's brother, C. V. Seagrim, I succeeded in getting in touch with him and he has provided me with an account of his adventures. It arrived too late for inclusion in the body of the book, so I give it here as an appendix, in Pagani's own words. He remains, so far as I know, the only man who escaped from the Burma-Siam railway and survived to tell the tale.)

December 18, 1941. Sailed for an unknown destination. Spent nearly two months at sea in the *Empress of Asia*.

February 3. Sailed into Singapore harbour. Bombed for one and a half hours by Japanese aircraft which set the ship on fire. Abandoned ship. Taken off by H.M.A.S. *Tarra*, but many swam for it due to panic. Landed on Singapore island about 3 p.m., minus all kit.

Spent three days getting re-equipped (such as it was), ten Bren-guns being the only automatic weapons allocated to our unit. My section had one of these.

February 7. Moved up to forward positions to engage reported enemy paratroops. Spent six hectic days, with no aircraft support. The section was cut off from the unit three

times during this period but we managed to get back again. (You must realise that my experiences were many during this period, but as they do not concern your book I have omitted them.)

February 13. **BLACK DAY.** Unit was bombed and mortared non-stop. C.O. put me in charge of remnants of unit and we took up positions round Div. H.Q. Stuck it out until 4.15 p.m. on the 15th. Was then ordered to collect all arms and ammunition and place them all together. Upon asking the reason for this, was informed of our surrender. Decided to have a shot at escape. Made my way to the harbour, which I reached about night-fall. Got hold of a small native craft and started to make my way west by the stars. The following morning I decided I would rest by day, so pulled on to a little island next to St. John's and stayed there all day. I saw the Japs land on St. John's, which was a penal settlement, at about midday. As soon as night fell I set off again, stopping at islands all the way. The last island I stopped at was called Morro where I obtained a container of food and cigarettes. My next hop was to be my longest and most risky as I had to reach Sumatra, which I did in two days after a great amount of luck and God's help. I hit the mouth of the Indragiri river and proceeded up it for about twenty miles, after which I contacted some sort of organisation and was transported to Padang by road and rail.

We were kept hanging about Padang until the 15th, on which date we were told that we must all be off the streets by 10 p.m. as the Japs were coming in. Myself and some survivors of the *Prince of Wales* got together and got a steam tug loaded up with supplies, etc., and shoved off, but we were forced to return and then interned in the barracks by the Japs. Our treatment here was good. Two months later 500 of us were detailed to parade with our belongings and were transported to Medan by road, and a rough journey it was. Here we were put on a ship with Dutch troops and off we went, our first stop being at Victoria Point in Burma where some

of the Dutch troops disembarked. The rest of us disembarked at Mergui where we were put to work. Our treatment was very bad, with little food and frequent beatings, and after a few days escape was my one objective. I was making plans for escape when I heard that we were going further north, so I decided to bide my time and let the Japs take me north, which would be easier than making my own way. Two months later we went on board ship again and got off at Tavoy, to find things harder still, working on airfields. Here I made plans for escape with a Chinaman who changed 500 Malay dollars for me into 300 Burmese rupees. But once more rumour had it that we were going north, so once more I decided to wait and see. We had been at Tavoy about four months when off we went by boat and reached Moulmein. Stayed in the jail one night and then put on the train. By this time there were only about 400 of the 500 men left, due to deaths from dysentery, etc. The following day we arrived at Thanbyuzayat which was the head of the Burma-Siam railway. From here we were sent seventeen and a half kilometres into the jungle and started work on the railway. Each platoon had a set job of work to do, so much earth per man having to be dug and shifted each day. Our accommodation here was bad, just a bamboo roof over our heads and a bamboo platform to sleep on, no clothes or bedding. I could see that we were here for keeps, so once more I laid plans for escape. I had two plans, the first to go to the sea about ten miles west and get a boat. If no boat was available I would double back to the railway and follow it northwards. The latter plan was the one I had to take. At 8 a.m. I walked out of camp after roll-call and started my journey. This would give me all day till the evening roll-call when I would be missed and then it would be too dark for the Japs to look for me, giving me a full twenty-four hours' start. My narrow squeaks were many, the closest being in Thanbyuzayat itself. I was walking along the road with a good growth of beard and a *pugri* round my head and a loincloth round my waist when coming towards me was

a guard of four Japanese. I dashed into a gateway with a drive and squatted down in the hedge as if I was 'spending a penny' as the natives do and chanced it. As soon as they passed me I got up and walked away. During my stay in the East I found that a European could always be detected, no matter how good his disguise, by his walk, due to the lack of sway in his posterior. So of course this I had perfected whilst a P.O.W., and I had hardened my feet by never wearing any footwear, as bad feet were the escaper's downfall.

On reaching a point five miles south of Moulmein I ran into an Indian paddy farmer who made arrangements for me to get on to the island of Bilaugyan which lies in the mouth of the Salween, the object of this being to miss Moulmein. The Indian then put me on a boat and took me to the west side of the Salween river where once more I picked up the railway, and this time it took me in a west-north-west direction. On passing Thaton station I was stopped by an Indian called Mohamed Essoof who offered to guide me to a British officer and his troops in the hills to the north. I was rather dubious about this story but decided to take a chance on it. I stayed in his house all day and set off that night under a pile of vegetables in a bullock-cart. We passed several Jap posts and headed north into Salween District. My first contact was a Karen called Saw Po Tin at Kyawaing who gave me a real English meal (except for a roast peacock) and a good bed with sheets. The next morning we set off for the house of a forest ranger called Saw Willie Saw, my most trusted friend and aide. He put me on an elephant and I proceeded north to Papun with an armed guard. I noticed that, now I was in the Karen country, all the villagers were friendly and willing to help me. I arrived at Papun and was taken to the house of an old French priest called Father Loizot with whom I stayed two days. Later I was introduced to another priest, Father Calmon, who sent a message to Major Seagrim. I stayed with the two priests for about a week waiting for a reply from the Major. Eventually it came, telling me to come



on up, so off I went on an elephant escorted by Naik Ah Din and his men. This journey took five days through the roughest jungle I have ever seen. The last day we went on foot up covered streams through thick bamboo forests to see a very small bamboo hut in front of us. But this was not Major Seagrim's house. From here a Kachin took me on a fifteen minutes' journey through the densest undergrowth I have ever seen. I then espied a bamboo house and standing on the verandah a tall dark man with hair bobbed as the Pathans wear it. In fact I could have sworn that he was an Indian, but then he spoke and both our voices trembled with emotion, and I must say he nearly shook my arm off, so great was his pleasure. Well, we sat up all that night talking our heads off. It was questions on both sides. I stayed with him about ten days. Never have I met such a likeable man in my life. He asked my religion and I told him I was a Roman Catholic. But this was not to stand between us and in fact he was keen to learn about my religion and various beliefs. When we were not talking you would always see him on and off reading the Bible, in fact he never went anywhere without it.

At this time we got news of bad feeling between Saw Darlington and Ah Din in the south. Father Calmon was also in it. We talked it over at great length and decided that I was to go to the south and try to smooth things out and also to take charge of the area. This time I decided to walk down as it would look better in the eyes of the Karens to show that an Englishman could walk as well as they did and did not always need waiting on. Besides, if I was going to take charge I had to show I could do as much as they did, but I must confess their pace of walking nearly finished me. I made it to Papun in three-and-a-half days where I stayed for a day with Father Loizot and took him a present of fifty cheroots as he liked them so much. I then went on to Kadaingti, thirty-two miles south of Papun, and installed myself in the village of Lance-Naik Mura, who took charge of everything concerning me, food, washing of clothes, etc. He would not let

anyone cook my food except himself. He saved my life on many occasions.

My instructions from the skipper were to smooth things out, to take charge, and, if any Jap or Burmese patrols entered the area, to attack them, but only if we felt certain that we could wipe them out. He said we were not to attack them if there was any doubt about beating them. He had told me to do what I thought was right and to take as my motto the words 'to think is to act'.

I tried to smooth things out in the south in this manner: Saw Darlington I put in charge of the Papun area, Naik Ah Din I put in charge of the levies round Kadaingti and Willie Saw in charge of the villages and villagers round Kadaingti. This way I hoped their interests would not clash. I controlled the price of salt at one rupee a vis as some people were making money out of it due to its being in short supply.

It was upon hearing that the Japs were making their way along the Bilin road to Papun that I left Kadaingti to try to head them off. Information received was that there were fifty Japs and twenty-five Burmese. They were holding some Karen elders as hostages, so we went up with four sections to try and scare the Japs into releasing them. We attacked them at night but the Japs replied with mortars and this scared my men except for Lance-Naik Mura, Naik Gyaw Lai and two Gurkhas. They were very cool and still carried on. We then retired to a village fifteen miles south of Papun to reunite our forces and hold a council of war. The next day we went up to Saw Darlington's place and decided that my section and I should go up to Pyagawpu and talk with the skipper. On getting up there I could not find him. So I decided to try and make my way to the British positions west of Burma. I had before discussed this with the skipper and he had given me a long letter to take with me in case we ever got separated and I had a chance to reach the Allies. The letter was to be destroyed if there was danger of my being captured. So I took

four Gurkhas and Lance-Naik Mura, who hailed from Assam and was my constant companion at all times.

The story of my journey you have correct up to the Pegu Yomas, so I will enlighten you as to what happened once we were on our own, Mura and myself. The first incident was our betrayal by a Burmese collaborator. He got Mura to the village to get my food. Mura was then set upon and captured. Then they came for me at night-fall and told me to go to the village with them. I knew something was amiss as we had arranged that Mura would always come back for me before going anywhere. This man had a rifle on his shoulder with the muzzle pointing towards me. You see, he was in front of me, so I let him get well ahead and loaded my tommy-gun in readiness. He made one mistake and it was that that saved my life. He pressed the trigger of the rifle without looking at me. At the same time three or four men fired shotguns at me from the bushes. The fellow with the rifle I immediately shot down and then took cover. I also shot two of the other fellows down. The others fled for it. For this I used one box magazine, which left me with three magazines and two hand-grenades. So off I went, changing my course to due north, later changing it to south-west. My next brush with the Burmans was two days later. I was enticed into a village for food and was taken to the priests' temple. I knew that while I was inside I was O.K. but I had a feeling that all was not well as one by one the Burmans left me. So I decided it was time for me to go. As I was putting my tommy-gun on my shoulder I heard one man shout out. On hearing this I saw the whole village coming towards me armed with *dabs* (the Burmese machetes) and crossbows. I started to run. One man grappled with me and tried to get my gun. I straight away put him out with a good hard punch and carried on into the short type of bushes which abound in these parts. First I ran north, the whole village following me. They would not come too close as they had too much respect for my gun. I then took cover in some prickly bushes, thoroughly exhausted. At

this time I could have drunk a gallon of water. I heard and saw them passing me and searching, but luckily I only had a couple of hours before night-fall. As soon as it was dark I broke cover, still dry in the throat, and decided the best way to go was due south as they would not expect me to go that way if I was making for India. It seemed now that I was continually thirsty. I came upon four or five wells only to find that they were salt-water wells. What a blow! Then I found another well, but this had no rope and bucket. By this time I was desperate for water. Then I saw that it had a rough ladder going down. This in my condition was a big obstacle, but I made it to the bottom and drank my fill. That night I travelled south. At daybreak I climbed a hill upon which was a Buddhist temple. The priest fed me and let me sleep. That day (April 11) our aircraft came over and raided Prome which we could see. To this priest I gave a chit as he was very helpful, showing me the Japanese positions. From our hill we had a panoramic view of the countryside, including the Irrawaddy river, my last big obstacle. At night-fall I set off for the river, full of hope. My journey to the river bank was without mishap. I had decided to swim it, so I got in with my gun around my shoulders. I had gone about 150 feet when the current got hold of me and I got into difficulties. First I let my gun go and really thought I was going to drown and I still don't know how I got to the bank once more. I must have been carried at least five miles downstream. Here some Burmese fishermen came towards me and I spoke with them in sign language. Mind you, I had to be very careful as I now had no gun. They said they would take me across to the other side. I got into a boat and off we went. All of a sudden there was shouting from the bank which we had just left and straight away instinct told me I had had it. I could do nothing in the boat so waited to see what chance I would have on landing. Well, we landed and my chances were very slim. There were about fifty Burmans there armed with shot-guns, *dabs*, etc. They tied a rope round my body over my

arms, which I tried to keep well away from my body. From this rope they kept a length about two yards long, so that I was like a dog on a lead. Off we went with myself in front. All of a sudden I slipped my ropes and ran, making for some bushes. I must have been within twenty-five feet of them when I caught my foot in one of the cracks in the mud and went sprawling. I got up to find one of my Burmese captors on top of me, so I brought him the best uppercut I have ever given to any man in my life. It just flattened him. I then set off once more. All of a sudden there was a loud explosion and I felt a terrible pain in my side, as if I had been hit hard with something. I felt my strength failing and suddenly they were all on me hitting and cutting my body. I then stopped, with them all round me, and thought I heard a dog snarling. I turned round to look for it and found nothing. I then coughed and it hurt me on my side. Next time I coughed I put my hand at the place to ease the pain, felt my hand wet and sticky, and looked at it to find a big clot of blood on it. I had now found my snarling dog. It was myself breathing through a hole in my back. I carry the scars from those wounds to this day, one in my head and four in my back. The next morning the Burmese took me on a stretcher to the Japs. A Jap doctor put stitches in my worst wound and they then sent me to Prome by truck. I was taken to the general hospital there and was operated on. Once I spent four hours on the operating table being sewn up, with no drugs to deaden the pain. I thought I would die. I was then shifted into a hut in the hospital grounds and here I stayed for a long time. We had many raids during this time. Once our planes set the whole town on fire, only to return that night for another go. I thought I was going to be killed by our own bombs as bomb splinters were flying through my hut, but my luck was still with me.

During my stay here I had many visits from the Jap intelligence. I adopted my son's Christian names, Terry Ashton Melvyn, and pretended to be a lieutenant in the American air

forces. When questions got too difficult I pleaded faintness. My wounds were my safeguard at all times. After about a month I was taken to Rangoon, still very weak, and put into the *Kempeitai* jail. I stayed here six weeks. Conditions were tough, but I still played on my wounds to get me out of difficult questions. I found that the Japanese were very conceited and liked to show that they knew all about everything, so that by hedging long enough at questions they would answer them themselves and ask me if that was right. All I said then was Yes and that satisfied them. After six weeks I was taken to Rangoon P.O.W. camp and put into solitary confinement. I was still so weak that I could not empty my tin without stopping a few times on the way. Beatings, etc., were daily routine. I spent four months in solitary and I think it was this that got my strength back as I used to lie down most of the day. I then joined one of the compounds and my life was the same as everybody else's. I was here for two years.

When we got orders for a move, the fittest men were singled out and we marched towards Pegu. This was good news to me as escape after passing Pegu would have brought me back into the Karen country. I was waiting my opportunity. This march was hard as we were attacked by our own planes and it was forced marching all the time. One morning we were set free by the Japs. What a surprise! But our troubles were not yet over as we did not know where we were and where the British lines were. At last we were picked up by our own men, free at last.

What did I gain from my escapes? Earlier release from the hands of the Japanese, and the knowledge that I was a better man than they, and that Major Seagrim was a hero among men and was not rewarded enough with the G.C. I only hope my son may be as brave as him.

## APPENDIX 3

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### A NOTE ON THE BURMA RIFLES, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE 2ND BATTALION<sup>1</sup>

Before 1935 there used to be three battalions of the Burma Rifles, 1st, 2nd and 3rd. A 4th battalion was formed at the time of the separation from India. They all had the same composition, two companies each of Karens, one of Chins and one of Kachins. After war broke out in Europe two more battalions were raised, the 5th and 6th, each with one company of Burmans, who were thus recruited into the regular Burma army for the first time. A battalion of Burma Military Police, mainly composed of Gurkhas and Kumaonis, was formed into the 7th battalion. A battalion of the Burma Frontier Force, composed of two companies each of Sikhs and Punjabi Mussulmans, was formed into the 8th battalion. The 9th was a reinforcement battalion based at Meiktila, the 10th a training battalion at Maymyo. The 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th were all territorial battalions hastily raised for service inside Burma.

When Japan declared war the 2nd battalion was at Mergui in south Tenasserim, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel D. C. H. O'Callaghan, a former Irish Davis Cup player. After the Japanese cut across the Kra isthmus to Tavoy the 2nd was evacuated by sea to Rangoon and went to Mingaladon. It was then ordered to go to Moulmein, coming under the command of the 17th Indian Division, but the campaign moved so quickly that it was halted at Kyaikto and ordered to go to Papun to block any attempted Japanese crossing of the Siamese

<sup>1</sup> See page 37.

frontier at Dagwin. Two companies marched with their mules, two went by motor transport, to Papun. One company was then stationed on the frontier near Dagwin, one further south to contest any northward push by the Japanese, two were kept in reserve in Papun and stationed temporarily in the police lines. Towards the end of March orders were received for the battalion to withdraw west to Shwegyin. Rear headquarters with seventeen elephants set off first but they found Shwegyin occupied by the B.I.A. under one Japanese officer. They engaged them and killed thirteen, including the Japanese officer. Orders were then received for the battalion to proceed to Toungoo. Rear headquarters skirted the hills, came out at Tantabin and marched to Toungoo. The main body reached Toungoo via Pyagawpu and Kyaukkyi. After some scattered rearguard actions south of Toungoo the battalion went into the Pegu Yomas with orders to attack the Japanese on the flank if they advanced up the road. Almost immediately, however, they were ordered to Allanmyo on the Irrawaddy north of Prome and crossed the river to Thayetmyo. The Japanese were advancing up the east bank and the 2nd withdrew north up the west bank. South of Pakokku they swung north-west and eventually reached Imphal via Gangaw, Kalemmyo, Tamu and Palel. The battalion numbered then between 400 and 500 men, mostly Karens. Most of the other battalions had already been disbanded east of the Chindwin. In all about 800 men of the Burma Rifles reached Imphal. The men were given the choice of staying with the British forces or of returning to their homes, in which case they would be given full arrears of pay, ten days' rations, a rifle and fifty rounds. More than half, most of them Karens, volunteered to stay with the British.

The 2nd battalion, now the only remaining battalion, went to India, trained in the Punjab and was reformed by Colonel O'Callaghan into ten platoons, each forty strong, designed for reconnaissance. Wingate became interested in them and they



went to join his troops training at Saugor. They fought with the utmost distinction all through the first Wingate expedition, and at its conclusion Wingate said they were the finest body of troops he had ever had. Every man of course spoke Burmese and was well acclimatised to the country and conditions. The new commander, Lieutenant-Colonel L. G. Wheeler, posthumously awarded the D.S.O., was unfortunately killed by a sniper, but casualties were not heavy although some men had to be left behind sick and others were taken prisoner. A Burmese officer, Major Aung Thin, was also awarded the D.S.O., and altogether the battalion won two D.S.O.s, one M.B.E., one Order of Burma, seven Military Crosses, twenty-one Burma Gallantry Medals (equivalent to the Distinguished Conduct Medal or the Indian Order of Merit), and twenty-seven Mentions in Despatches.

More than 300 men came out and Burmese-speaking reinforcements were then sought from all over India. The battalion had done so well that for the next Wingate expedition it was planned to form forty-eight reconnaissance platoons, each commanded by a Burmese-speaking officer of the Burma Rifles, each composed of three British sections and one section of eleven Burmese-speaking Burma Riflemen. All the various columns and parties in the second Wingate expedition had these platoons attached and they did invaluable work, scouting, ambushing, obtaining intelligence, arranging for boats, food, supplies, etc. The battalion collected sixteen more M.C.s and numerous other decorations. Once again casualties were not too heavy and the battalion gathered so many recruits inside Burma that it came out stronger numerically than it went in.

When Wingate's so-called Special Force was disbanded, the 2nd battalion was reformed, in March, 1945, on an ordinary infantry basis, one third Karen, one third Kachin, one third Chin. Unfortunately it did not take part in the final campaign that drove the Japanese out of Burma, after it had

played such a prominent part in all the earlier operations. At the time of Japan's surrender many of the men in the battalion had been away from their homes for five years. There were now eight Karen officers with King's commissions, three Chins and one Kachin.

Truly, a proud record.

## APPENDIX 4

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### THE KAREN PROPHECY RELATING TO THE LAST BATTLE TO BE FOUGHT AT PYAGAWPU<sup>1</sup>

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Sitting round the fire one night at Pyagawpu, Digay told me the following story.

There was an old Karen woman whose husband died, leaving her with a baby girl called Mu-ye-pe. When this girl grew up she became very beautiful and the fame of her beauty reached even the Shans in the north, and the Shan king determined to have her for one of his wives. So he sent his men down to Pyagawpu to see how best they could capture Mu-ye-pe. The Shans were wily. They offered the Karens much money for working for them with the result that many of the Karens were eager to work for the Shans. Her mother also wanted Mu-ye-pe to go and work for the Shans and bring home money, but Mu-ye-pe suspected that the Shans wanted her and she refused to go. At last, however, she yielded to her mother and went to work for the Shans. To make quite sure that this girl was indeed Mu-ye-pe, the Shan king sent a man to follow her to her home. On the way she became thirsty and drank at a stream, and when she drank the man who was following her saw a rainbow in front of her mouth. He told this to the king who then knew for certain that it was Mu-ye-pe. The king sent an expedition which captured Mu-ye-pe and took her north to the Shan king's palace.

Now a cousin of Mu-ye-pe was deeply in love with her. He went to the Shan king and asked for her to be returned to him. The Shan king said: 'If you can get me a bamboo measuring

<sup>1</sup> See page 168 (Epilogue).

three and a half yards with only one joint in it, I will release Mu-ye-pe.' He thought no such bamboo existed. But it so happens that there is a species of almost jointless bamboo found near Pyagawpu called by the Karens *Wa-thaw-ke*. The young Karen took some to the king, but the king still would not release Mu-ye-pe. He said: 'Find me a bamboo with yellow leaves which are not withered, and I will release Mu-ye-pe.' Over on Salween side, unknown to the king, there was a bamboo with yellow leaves called *Wa-baw*, and the young Karen took some of this bamboo to the king. This time the Shan king kept his promise and released Mu-ye-pe. She returned to Pyagawpu with her cousin. On the way he asked her whether she was still a virgin. She replied: 'If you cross a stream, you get your feet wet.' Then the cousin knew that she had slept with the Shan king, and he decided that he did not want her for his wife after all. So Mu-ye-pe returned to the Shan king, but, before going, she said to her mother: 'If, when you are weaving, a drop of blood falls on the cloth, don't wash it out with water. Just take some cotton and dry it up.'

When Mu-ye-pe returned to the palace, the Shan king was angry with her for all the trouble she had given him and he resolved to put her to death. He had his men dig a pit, and place beside it a heavy log, which would fit into the pit like a pestle into a mortar. Mu-ye-pe was bound and put in the pit. Then the king ordered his elephant men to bring elephants and push the log into the pit, so that Mu-ye-pe would be crushed to death. But the elephants, all big male tusked, saw Mu-ye-pe in the pit and scented death and refused to push the log. Then the king ordered a blind elephant to be brought and this elephant pushed the log into the hole crushing Mu-ye-pe to death. Her blood flowed over the edge of the pit, and a drop of it fell in Pyagawpu on the cloth that her mother was weaving. But the mother had forgotten what her daughter had told her and she washed the blood out with water. If she had not done this, Mu-ye-pe would have come to life again.

This same Shan king made war against the Karens. He attacked Kyaukkyi and burned many Karen villages. The Shans made an armed encampment at Pyagawpu, where the police lines now are, and the deep fosse which they dug all round can be seen there to this day. The English were already in Burma and when they heard that the Shans were giving trouble to the Karens they came up into the Karen hills and marched from Papun to Pyagawpu up the valley of the Bilin river. Near Pyagawpu they made friends with the Karen elders, including Digay's father, and then they attacked the Shans and put them to flight. Ever since that time the Karens had a saying: 'When war next comes to the Karen hills, it will again end at Pyagawpu.'

When Digay was about twenty, a girl was born near Pyagawpu who was very beautiful and quite white. All the Karens said: 'She must be a descendant of Mu-ye-pe.' This girl was able to foretell the future. If she said: 'A guest will come today,' then a guest came that day. If she said: 'The rains will be early this year,' then indeed they were early. But she was not strong and died of fever when she was thirteen.

Digay told me of three other Karen prophecies which the Karens considered to have come true. 'Iron will be on the surface of the water.' A reference to iron ships. 'The giant birds will eat up the people.' A reference to bombing planes. 'The centipedes will shorten the distance.' A reference to trains which, from a distance, look like centipedes.

When I asked him where he thought the Karens originally came from, Digay told me the following story.

The Karens are from the north, and came down to Burma because it was too thickly populated where they were. One day an old Karen man and woman went out fishing. They saw a piece of land, an island, which they liked and decided to stake out a claim to it. So they put a fishing rod there and a Karen tunic and a big log to show that the piece of land belonged to them. They returned to their old home to fetch

their children and belongings. While they were away the Shans came to the island, and, to establish their claim, buried an iron hook. The Talaings came and buried a flat piece of iron. The Burmans came and buried a copper plate. The English came and buried a golden tray. Then the Karens and all the other peoples came to claim the island. The Karens said that they were there first, but when they came to prove their claim they found that the white ants had eaten the rod, the wind had blown the tunic away and the log had floated down the river. So the Shans occupied the island, and when the Talaings conquered the Shans, the Talaings occupied it, and so on down to the British. 'As for the Karens, although they were the first to see the island, they will be the last to rule it.'

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## APPENDIX 5

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### A NOTE ON COLONEL SUZUKI, ALIAS BOH MO GYO<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Suzuki made a great name for himself with the Burmese. He was undoubtedly a clever man and was said to have been one of the most brilliant young officers of his day. His adoption of the Burmese name of Boh Mo Gyo was a stroke of genius. There was an old Burmese prophecy about a Braminy duck which used to eat fish in a certain pond. A hunter killed the duck. An umbrella struck the hunter and killed him. A thunderbolt then struck and destroyed the umbrella. (A popular song based on this prophecy had been banned before the war.) The fish in the pond represents the Ava dynasty; the Braminy duck, the Talaings from Hantawaddy; the hunter, Alaungpaya; the umbrella, the British; the latter part of the prophecy remained to be fulfilled. There is an elaborate and typically Burmese play on words involved. *Inn* means fishery; *Inn-wa* the Ava dynasty; *Hintba* means Braminy duck, found in great numbers in *Hantawaddy*, where the Talaings came from; *Moksob* means hunter, *Moksobbo* is one of the four old names of Shwebo where Alaungpaya was born; *Hti-yo* means an umbrella stick; *Ta-ta* means Saturday, a day which is astrologically connected in Burma with the arrival of the British; *Mo-gyo* means thunderbolt and also 'alloy' or 'mixture'. Suzuki used to maintain that he was partly Burmese and was the grandson of a Burmese prince who had been exiled to Europe. His claim was quite without foundation but it was accepted by the credulous Burmese.

<sup>1</sup> See page 65.

Suzuki did not get on with Lieutenant-General Iida, the first Japanese commander-in-chief, and later he fell out with the all-powerful *Kempeitai*. He was eventually sent back to Japan. Aung San saw him on a visit to Tokyo in 1943. 'I am in disgrace,' he said, and tears rolled down his cheeks.



## APPENDIX 6

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### CITATIONS OF SEAGRIM'S AWARDS

*The M.B.E. (awarded in the summer of 1942, after the retreat from Burma).*

It was to this officer's faith in the Karen that the formation of the Karen Levies was largely due. For weeks he sat several days' march behind the Japanese forward positions and trained Karen irregulars. His presence and training maintained Karen morale and friendship to us long after the civil administration had ceased to exist and our armies had retreated north. His actions in thus living behind the enemy will prove of great benefit to us when we counter-attack, for he built up a useful number of guerrillas who on several occasions resisted incursions by pro-Jap Burmese rebel bands.

*The D.S.O. (awarded in the latter part of 1943).*

This officer has remained 380 miles within enemy-held territory ever since its occupation by the Japanese forces in April, 1942. During this period he has sustained the loyalty of the local inhabitants of a very wide area and thereby has provided the foundation of a pro-British force whenever occupying forces arrive in that area. This officer has now been contacted by Major Nimmo, A.B.R.O., and is passing valuable military intelligence by wireless. The fact that he has remained alone in constant danger and has maintained pro-British sympathies in such adverse circumstances, has proved his determination, courage and devotion to be of the highest order.

*The George Cross (gazetted on September 12th, 1946).*

Major Seagrim was the leader of a party, including two British and one Karen officers, which operated in the Karen Hills, Burma, from February, 1943 to February, 1944.

Towards the end of 1943 the presence of this party became known to the Japanese who commenced a widespread campaign of arrests and torture in order to discover its whereabouts. In February, 1944, the two British officers with Major Seagrim were located, ambushed and killed, but Major Seagrim and the Karen officer escaped.

The capture of the two British officers' equipment furnished the enemy with all the information they required of Major Seagrim's activities and they accordingly redoubled their efforts to locate him. Captured documents show that the Japanese arrested at least 270 people including elders and headmen. Many of these were tortured and killed in the most brutal fashion.

In spite of this the Karens continued to assist and shelter Major Seagrim, but the enemy managed to convey a message to him that if he surrendered they would cease reprisals. Major Seagrim accordingly did so about March 15, 1944. He was immediately conveyed to Rangoon along with certain other members of his party. On September 2, together with eight others, he was sentenced to death. On hearing the sentence Major Seagrim pleaded that the others be excused since they had had to obey his orders and that he alone should suffer the death sentence. Throughout his sojourn in jail he made every effort to comfort his men and sustain their courage by his Christian example, and the degree to which he had inspired them may be realised from the fact that they all expressed their willingness to die with him. The death sentence on Major Seagrim was carried out shortly afterwards.

There can hardly be a finer example of self-sacrifice and bravery than that exhibited by this officer who in cold blood deliberately gave himself up to save others, knowing well what his fate was likely to be at the hands of the enemy.

### *Citation of the Victoria Cross awarded to Derek Seagrim.*

On the night of the 20th-21st March, 1943, the task of a battalion of the Green Howards was to attack and capture an important feature on the left flank of the main attack on the Mareth Line. The defence of this feature was very strong and it was protected by an anti-tank ditch twelve feet long and eight feet deep with mine-fields on both sides. It formed a new part of the main defences of the Mareth Line and the successful capture of this feature was vital to the success of the main attack.

From the time the attack was launched the battalion was subjected to the most intense fire from artillery, machine-guns and mortars and it appeared more than probable that the battalion would be held up, entailing failure of the main attack.

Realising the seriousness of the situation Lieutenant-Colonel Seagrim placed himself at the head of his battalion which was, at the time, suffering heavy casualties, and led it through a hail of fire.

He personally helped the team which was placing the scaling ladder over the anti-tank ditch and was himself the first to cross it. He led the assault, firing his pistol, throwing grenades and personally assaulting two machine-gun posts which were holding up the advance of one of his companies. It is estimated that in this phase he killed or captured twenty Germans.

This display of leadership and personal courage led directly to the capture of the objective.

When dawn broke the battalion was firmly established on the position, which was of obvious importance to the enemy, who immediately made every effort to regain it. Every post was mortared and machine-gunned unmercifully, and movement became practically impossible, but Lieutenant-Colonel Seagrim was quite undeterred. He moved from post to post organising and directing the fire until the attackers were wiped out to a man.

By his valour, disregard for personal safety and outstanding example, he so inspired his men that the battalion successfully took and held its objective, thereby allowing the attack to proceed.

Lieutenant-Colonel Seagrim subsequently died of wounds received in action.

## APPENDIX 7

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### A NOTE ON THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF THE KARENS

*(Written in May 1947)*

This book was written in July 1946 and revised in December of that year. In April 1947 I had to visit Burma to report on the elections to a constituent assembly and I found that during the preceding months there had been political developments which will undoubtedly have an important bearing on the future of the Karens. I should like to give an indication of these developments.

In April and May 1946 there was widespread dissatisfaction in Burma with the White Paper and it looked as if Burma would soon be in the throes of an armed nationalist uprising such as occurred in both the Netherlands East Indies and French Indo-China. If such an uprising had taken place, it must be regretfully but frankly admitted that we should not have had sufficient armed strength to suppress it or even to give much protection to British officials and traders in the outlying districts. To avert such an uprising the Governor's executive council was re-formed in October, and its powers considerably enlarged, so as to include the young nationalist leaders, led by Aung San, who had hitherto been in opposition. The latter merely used their new posts to intensify the agitation for independence. The situation became more and more threatening and in January 1947 the nationalist leaders were summoned to a conference in London. As a result of this conference an agreement was signed, by Mr. Attlee for Great Britain, by Aung San for Burma, which

substantially modified the provisions of the original White Paper. It was decided that the forthcoming elections should be, not to a legislature on the 1935 model, but to a constituent assembly, and that Burma should have full freedom to decide herself whether she wanted to remain within the British Empire or whether she wanted to secede from it and be completely independent. As regards those clauses in the White Paper relating to the Frontier Areas which had been so bitterly and universally criticised by the Burmese, it was resolved, firstly, to convene a conference of representatives of the hill peoples to sound out their wishes, secondly, to set up a mixed Frontier Areas Enquiry Commission to consider the best means of associating the hill peoples with the working out of a constitution for Burma as a whole.

The conference, held at Panglong, was attended by representatives of the Shans, Chins and Kachins and by some Karen observers from the Karen hills. It was adjudged to have been a great success. The commission of enquiry was also set up and consisted of four Burmese and four representatives of the hill peoples (one each from the Shans, Kachins, Chins and hill Karens), under the chairmanship of Lieutenant-Colonel David Rees-Williams, Labour M.P. for South Croydon. It took evidence from the hill peoples of Lower Burma and at the end of March moved its headquarters to Maymyo in the Shan States to take evidence from the peoples of Upper Burma.

Things are happening so quickly in Burma that whatever I may write now (May 9, 1947) will be hopelessly out-of-date by the time this book appears in print and it is not easy to foresee with certainty what the new Burma will be like or what form relations between the Burmese and the hill peoples will take. The commission of enquiry has not yet published its report. At the same time, while not going in detail into a complex and rapidly changing political situation, I wish to record that in this spring of 1947 there was grave and widespread anxiety amongst the Karens about their future.

A very small and unimportant element, chiefly composed of young boys, led by San Po Thin, had decided to throw in their lot unreservedly with the Burmese nationalists. For his advocacy of this policy San Po Thin had been obliged to resign from the presidency of the Karen National Union, the new Karen body formed when the Karen National Association and the Karen Central Organisation decided to amalgamate.

The Karen National Union, which represented all responsible and influential Karen opinion, had refused to accept the Attlee-Aung San agreement. Its nominee had been obliged to resign from the Governor's executive council, his place being taken by San Po Thin, and it boycotted the elections to a constituent assembly. The Karens who were eventually returned to the twenty-four Karen seats were nearly all men from the pro-Burmese element mentioned above and were in fact nominated by Aung San himself.

It may be asked: What then do the Karens want? Perhaps the answer can best be taken from a document drafted by one of their own most influential leaders. It declares that 'the hill Karens wish to remain under the direct control of a British Governor', for the following reasons:

'Firstly, ninety-five per cent of the Karens in the hills are still illiterate, at least ninety per cent still do not even understand Burmese to an appreciable extent. The bulk of the population knows nothing about democracy and dictatorship, about communism and fascism, about dominion status and independence. They realise only that they owe everything to the British and the Allies for their present liberation. At present they acknowledge no other master except the British and they still wish to be under the control of the British at least for an indefinite period.

'Secondly, the Karens in this area do not want to live among their neighbours who are by nature turbulent and rebellious, who never hesitate to commit robbery and dacoity, to carry out strikes and sedition, and who are prone to resort

to rowdyism and hooliganism; whereas the Karens want to live in a place where there is orderly administration with good discipline in all of the services, and it is their conviction that two peoples of different temperaments and characteristics, and different moral conceptions and ethical principles cannot be paired together under the same yoke of equal weightage.

'Thirdly, the present Burmese leaders have no plans and schemes whatever, not to say of concrete pecuniary help or otherwise, for the development of the Karen hill areas, educationally, industrially, hygienically, and so on. Such leaders with no plans prepared ahead are unfit to look after the interests of a backward people.

'Fourthly, if a separate area is given to the Karens with provincial autonomy in their hands they will prove that they can excel other districts in Burma in the maintenance of law and order, peace and personal security, and in the upkeep of a high tradition of discipline and morale, if not in other respects. Salween District is already leading with a clean record of dacoity and no serious crimes. The Karens want to live in such a place.

'Fifthly, the Karens went through a series of bitter experiences during the war attributable to the treachery of some of their crafty neighbours. They shall not forgive and forget the atrocities and rape committed at Papun in April and May 1942 and they cannot forget hateful measures of religious intolerance and barbarism committed in certain parts during the Japanese occupation. Experience has taught them to be cautious and their best safeguard is to establish a territory of their own where they are given the powers to look after their own interests and manage their own affairs with the option of remaining within the British Empire if they wish to.

'Sixthly, the Karens are bewildered to learn that the British have ignored their promises given during the war and have let them down by delegating power to a leading party of Burmese to shape their future destiny during such time when their racial existence is seriously threatened. If the



British Government have any conscience at all they shall not allow a favoured few who are biased and prejudiced already to dictate terms to an unwilling people.'

That is one side of the question. But there is also another. Having quoted a Karen spokesman, let me also quote a responsible Burmese, writing in *The Burmese Review* of March 3, 1947. He is commenting on a letter which appeared in *The Manchester Guardian* suggesting the creation of a Karen Crown Colony consisting of two areas, the Tenasserim division and Bassein.

'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and complicated political questions cannot be settled by dicta passed from an armchair in the quiet precincts of a provincial university in the United Kingdom . . .

'The political standing of the Karen areas is not homogeneous. The Karenni States are independent states under British protection, the Karens in the Frontier Areas come under the special arrangements devised by the Government of Burma Act of 1935, while the Karens of the Irrawaddy Delta share with the Burmese the constitutional advance which the latter have attained. To cut the Gordian knot by the creation of two separate Karen States, joined into a Crown Colony under direct British rule and independent of the rest of Burma, would merely substitute a more tangled knot of political problems. It ignores the fact that the Karens are not a majority population in the Tenasserim division and that in the proposed Bassein State, the Burmese and Karens live intermingled and it is doubtful whether the Karens in fact form a majority there.

'It is mischievous to mislead the Karens into thinking that they should look to the United Kingdom for a solution, as the facts of geography cannot be ignored. The Karens are closely related by race to the Burmese and the two races have lived together for many centuries and will have to live together in close contiguity in the centuries to come. If a settlement is imposed by the United Kingdom against the wishes

of the Burmese it will not endure and Britain is in no position to leave a permanent force in Burma to maintain the uneasy settlement.

‘The Burmese are fully conscious of the need for an amicable settlement of outstanding questions relating to the Karens. The writer of the letter in *The Manchester Guardian* and people of his way of thinking will be well advised to leave the settlement to the good sense of the Burmese and the Karen leaders. An interim settlement has already been reached between the Burmese on one side and the Shans, Kachins and Chins on the other. The Karens are nearer to the Burmese than any of these three races and there is no reason to believe that an equitable settlement is beyond the statesmanship of the leaders of the two races.

‘If it is the firm desire of the Karens to have a separate state of their own as an integral part of a united Burma, there is no reason to believe that the Constituent Assembly, which is the proper organ for the settlement of the question, should not be able to reach agreement on defining the geographical limits of such a state and its relation to the rest of Burma. A population of seventeen millions makes only a small nation and there is no room for subdivision into independent units . . .

‘It is impolitic to ignore apprehensions in the minds of any section of the Karen race in regard to their political future and it is only by wise statesmanship on the part of Burmese leaders that these fears can be allayed and the Karens can be satisfied that they will have a secure and happy future in the self-governing Burma that is to come. An important factor towards a solution would be the full appreciation by the Karens that the facts of geography link their future with the Burmese and that their greatest security lies not in an imposed settlement but in the goodwill of the Burmese. The Karens are a virile race which has formed a valuable element in the life of Burma and they have many endearing qualities which have not been lost on the Burmese. Many Karens will

be needed in the Burma Army in which they have already distinguished themselves in two world wars and the future political progress of Burma lies in harmonious relations between the Burmese and the minority races which people Burma.

'A settlement must be found, but it can be found only by frank and friendly discussion in Burma.'

It remains to be seen whether wise and moderate counsels such as the above will prevail. The true issue is almost more between Burmese moderates and hotheads and between Karen moderates and hotheads than it is between the Burmese as a people and the Karens as a people. It should not be difficult, *on paper*, to devise a scheme that would meet the ancient longing of the Karens for 'a place of their own' and give them some safeguards against the absorption and eventual racial extinction which is what they fear deep down in their hearts, a scheme that would at the same time enable them to play their part in a united Burma. The Karens, however, fear that, although a satisfactory scheme may be drawn up on paper, it will never function satisfactorily in practice, and that, once the British leave Burma, the Karens will find themselves exposed and defenceless.

For an Englishman one of the unhappiest features of the ending of British rule in India and Burma is that in both countries we are having to withdraw protection from weaker people and classes to whom we had given protection and who had come to expect protection from us. No one is more conscious of this aspect of the present situation than myself. But I am firmly convinced that at a certain stage in the political evolution of both countries British rule as such had to end and an effort be made to place our relations with them on a different footing. At a certain stage, when peoples have learned to organise, a continuation of foreign rule becomes *physically* impossible.

If my heart is with the Karen spokesman quoted above, my head is with the writer of the Burmese editorial. I believe

with him that a lasting and amicable settlement of Burmese-Karen relations can only be achieved by the Burmese and the Karens themselves. Whether a settlement is in fact achieved depends, as do nearly all international issues, on the extent to which the men of intelligence and goodwill can enforce their views and their wills on the blind, uninstructed, excitable masses.



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